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ВАСИЛИЙ АЖАЕВ

ДАЛЕКО ОТ МОСКВЫ

РОМАН

В ТРЕХ КНИГАХ



КНИГА ВТОРАЯ

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО
ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
МОСКВА 1950

VASILI AZHAYEV

FAR FROM MOSCOW

A NOVEL

IN THREE PARTS



BOOK TWO

FOREIGN
LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
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CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter One. TWO ON SKIS	7
Chapter Two. ROGOV'S HEADQUARTERS	50
Chapter Three. THE NANAIS ON THEIR OWN LAND	94
Chapter Four. AT TANYA VASILCHENKO'S	116
Chapter Five. A STRICT SCORE	155
Chapter Six. THOUGHTS IN SOLITUDE	191
Chapter Seven. A LITTLE HOUSE UNDER THE SNOW	215
Chapter Eight. LIFE'S RHYTHM	243
Chapter Nine. THE PROJECT IS APPROVED	289
Chapter Ten. ON THE WAY TO THE STRAIT	330
Chapter Eleven. KARPOV JOINS THE CONSTRUCTION	384
Chapter Twelve. SO THIS IS THE WORLD'S END!	424



CHAPTER ONE

TWO ON SKIS

ALEXEI called on Beridze at peep of dawn, and found him dressed and trying on his knapsack. They looked each other over carefully and were about to set out when they were stopped by Rodionova who emerged from her room. She peered into their faces with narrowed sleepy eyes and felt their pulse.

"Did you take the medicine kit I gave you?" she asked Beridze.

"Certainly. You might have been a little more generous with one of the items, though," Beridze answered with a smile. "Thrown in some more of that stuff for taking internally."

"You treat it as a joke!" Olga said in a tone of reproof, "but I'm very worried about you. Alexei's an athlete, he's used to it." She looked admiringly at the broad-shouldered figure of Kovshov, well-knit even in his padded clothes. "Ten days on skis is no joke. Aren't you overrating your own powers of endurance?"

"Don't you worry, my dear doctor, the trip will do me good," Beridze answered, and there was a tinge of annoyance in his voice. "When we come back Alexei will tell you whether I lagged behind him or not during the journey."

"Didn't you want to give us a letter for Rogov?" Kovshov reminded her.

Olga looked confused.

"I didn't write it. I'm only good at writing prescriptions. Just tell him ... that now he isn't here I often think of him. I'll be glad to see him. But don't let him think that I'm calling him. He may suddenly take it into his head to come running down!" She laughed,

evidently picturing to herself Rogov's impetuous appearance.

"Is that all?" Alexei asked. She nodded.

"Olga! Olga dear!" Serafima called from the kitchen. "I nearly forgot. I've prepared a little package here for Tanya—some patties and meat dumplings. Let Alexei Nikolayevich take it."

Kovshov was obliged to undo his bag to pack away the gift.

"I'll take it, but I'm not so sure Tanya will get it," he joked as he slung the bag onto his back.

Olga saw the engineers off and stood for a while in the doorway, as though expecting them to come back. She felt suddenly forlorn and perturbed. The presence in the house of Beridze, always so cheerful and vivacious, had a soothing effect upon her. Alexei had become a trusted and reliable friend—he had a way with him which set her at her ease. The place seemed lonely without them....

Olga's eyes lighted on the suitcase which Khmara, her late husband's friend, had brought. She had not touched it since that terrible day, although it stood there all the time in full view and distressed her. With a pang in her heart, a mixed feeling of distrust,

agitation and something almost akin to physical pain, Olga opened the suitcase. The things were undoubtedly Konstantin's—his suit, rather badly rumpled, the underwear she had bought for him in Rubezhansk, his shaving set and Turkish towel, and underneath it all several thick copybooks filled with writing in a sprawling hand. It all smelt of his tobacco.

Olga sat on the floor amid the scattered things, pale, with closed eyes, and arms hanging limply at her sides. These inanimate things spoke to her in different voices of a man she had loved and lived with for several years. At her request Zalkind and Kovshov had made enquiries and received official confirmation to the effect that Doctor Konstantin Andreyevich Rodionov had really been taken off the train in a serious condition, had died and been buried at Taishet.

She now blamed herself for her unkind attitude towards her husband. Like most men, he was not without his faults, but surely that did not justify her in so quickly and easily drifting away from him? At a time when he needed support, a steady hand to guide him, she had simply repulsed him, driven him out. And even when his better self had triumphed, and he had gone to the front

with an open heart, she had not believed him, had accused him of dissimulation!

Olga turned over the leaves of the copybooks without seeing what was written in them—it was all a violet blur before her eyes. She felt ashamed that she could think about Rogov these days, that she had not had any qualms in speaking about it to utter strangers. She got up from the floor on a sudden impulse with the copybooks in her hand, and ran to the door to call Alexei back, to warn him not to tell Rogov anything about her, not a word! It was all nonsense, frivolousness, desecration of the dead man's memory.

... Kovshov and Beridze were reclining side by side on an armful of hay in one of the trucks which sped swiftly down the Adun. An icy wind whistled overhead. They had decided to make the journey to the nearest works section next to the Nanai village of Nampi by motor, and thence on skis. Next to them sat Zalkind, his back to the wind. He was travelling to the petroleum refinery not far from Nampi and had changed into their truck for the sake of company. The Party organizer was in excellent spirits. He had good news to report to his companions; first, the Novinsk au-

tomobile assembly works was being launched the next day, and secondly, his son Lyonka had returned from sea and wired that he would be coming home on leave.

"I'll repeat to you what Batmanov said yesterday!" Zalkind shouted, leaning over towards the engineers. "Don't have too many irons in the fire at once! You'll come up against thousands of problems at each section. See that you don't get swamped by them and let yourselves be carried away from your main purpose, which is to clear up the main points of the construction plan."

They got off near the refinery, which spread along the banks of the Adun over a vast territory. Near-by like a dark rampart stood the brooding silent taiga.

"Odd neighbours—these wilds and this refinery, the latest word in twentieth-century engineering!" Zalkind said. "Rather unusual, Alexei, isn't it?"

Skirting the factory building, the engineers with their skis on their shoulders, and Zalkind, came out onto a level field. Dozens of huge whitewashed oil tanks stood here in checkered arrangement.

"Empty, I guess," Beridze said gloomily with a nod in their direction.

"Yes, they're empty," Zalkind confirmed. "The petroleum that was shipped down during the navigation season has already been worked up into benzine and shipped off to the front right away. The refinery is running on reduced rations. The stuff that comes in by rail from places thousands of kilometres away goes straight into the plant." Zalkind spoke calmly, but there was a tinge of bitterness in his voice. Pointing a finger into the distance, he added: "And out there on the island a sea of oil has accumulated, pumped out of the earth. A sea of oil that will lie useless until the spring!"

"It breaks your heart to think of the tank and plane engines that are waiting for that fuel!" Alexei said.

"They'll start cross-examining me now at the refinery—when is the petroleum going to pour into these tanks through that pipe line of yours? What shall I tell them, comrades engineers?" Zalkind asked jokingly.

"Tell them we're as eager to see it as they are. It's all we dream of," Beridze said, looking gravely at the Party organizer.

The boundless vault of the sky was drawn by a smooth whitish veil. The sun stood a dull hazy smudge in a pale rainbow fringe. All was of the same hue both on the earth

and in the sky. The river alone stood out like a trough hewn out of the earth and stretching into murky infinity. It was there the engineers and the Party organizer were now gazing.

"It's going to be a sunny day—you are in luck," Zalkind said. They stood for a moment in silence. "Well, off you go, comrades engineers, turn loose," Zalkind smiled and gently pushed Kovshov in the back.

This served as a sort of signal. Alexei swung his arms back, bent his knees and went gliding down the slope towards the river. Beridze, with a nod to Zalkind, followed.

"The best of luck and a speedy return, dear friends!" the Party organizer cried when they reached the ice of the river and simultaneously turned round to him.

Soon their dark figures were swallowed up in the distance. Zalkind looked up at the sun, which resembled a grease stain on a sheet of paper, and turned his steps towards the factory.

During the two hours which he spent there the skiers left a long trail between them and Novinsk. The sun began to break through the muddy sky. It grew steadily stronger and all at once its shafts burst through a rift in the

sky, throwing the whole landscape into sparkling relief.

The engineers had the sun's company on the second day too, and on the third and fourth. At first they seemed to think there was too much of it on the river, for its glare dazzled their eyes. But after a while they got used to the unvarying brilliance, as they did to the continuous travelling. They crossed and recrossed the Adun many times and explored all the bends of its arms and channels, its gradients and bluffs on both banks. They dropped in at all the villages and questioned the inhabitants closely about all the river's habits and its fullest flood tides. With the help of the section workers they measured the thickness of the ice, sounded the depths and determined the speed of the current scores of times. The engineers' notebooks were filled with fresh notes and their topographical maps embellished with new lines of corrections. They were now able to measure and inspect every metre of the line, and see for themselves that the builders had settled on the left bank and forgotten about the right.

The chief engineer and his assistant were well aware of the need to hurry. Batmanov had cut their time allowance very fine, and

they tried to keep from straying from the main object. But life on the works' sections absorbed them in spite of themselves, and it was a wrench each time to leave one section to pass onto the next.

At Section Three the engineers were kept busy all day settling disputes between Yefimov and Temkin. Temkin, the secretary of the Party organization, accused Yefimov of setting up his red-tape methods of organization on the left bank as well.

"It's about time we realized that this is not an institution or a factory office here—we're a local construction unit," Temkin argued, irritated at his own weak voice and scowling at Yefimov. "We've got to keep in touch with the real work, and here you are again trying to collect the whole administrative and technical staff around you. The foremen and building superintendents are obliged to drop their work several times a day and come running in to headquarters in answer to your calls. Nekrasov complained again today—you don't give him a chance to get on with the bakery and the power station, keep on taking away his workmen to build the office—that's more important to you. This won't do at all!"

Beridze sided wholly with Temkin. He telephoned Batmanov to get the latter's sanction for making organizational changes at Section Three. The construction chief listened attentively and told him that Zalkind would take care of Section Three. Batmanov was displeased that the engineers were staying so long at this section.

"I got a telegram from Dudin and Pisarev today," he said. "They've received Grubsky's memorandum, and are calling us all out. They want to go into the matter of the projects. I promised to be in Rubezhansk in ten or twelve days, but now I can see you won't be back in Novinsk before a month or two. I'll probably have to come out after you and give you a push on."

After this admonition the engineers bestirred themselves and set off again down the line, hurrying to make up for lost time. Moving uninterruptedly all day and night they concentrated their attention on prospecting. At Section Four, however, Melnikov contrived to distract them again. They were building here by the assembly method proposed by two carpenters, the Pestov brothers. Beridze and Alexei, together with Melnikov, went down to the building sites.

Squared beams, rafters, lathes, window frames and doors, prefabricated at the sawmill, lay stacked on a level plot The team of the elder brother Fyodor, a burly dark-haired man, was assembling a warehouse, while the lean fair-headed Semyon and his team were engaged in assembling a barrack. The Pestovs were timing the process—the time allowed for fitting and setting each beam was strictly limited. The work proceeded swiftly and smoothly, and the clean-planed walls of white beams rose as you watched. Beridze became interested in the Pestovs, gave them some advice and promised to introduce this method of assembling prefabricated wooden structures at the other sections too.

"Will you stay overnight?" Melnikov asked, going up to the chief engineer.

Beridze looked at Alexei in dismay, shocked to discover that the whole day had gone and now evening had overtaken them.

The next day Beridze and Kovshov crossed the boundary between Sections Four and Five, marked off by a simple wooden arch against which nestled the tiny hut of the control-dispatcher point. This was considered the last

of the near sections and the first of the distant sections along the line. Rogov was in charge here.

The skiers set out at daybreak and glided swiftly over the bright moonlit track, snaking in and out on the ice of the river. The mute trees along the banks, bulky in their winter coats, seemed to be sailing backward. The indigo cloak of the sky began to glimmer in the East. Soon the sky-blue streak turned pink and then blazed in flames of light. The stars were quickly snuffed out, vanishing into the depths of the sky. The moon lost its lustre, and, when the sun's disk rode out, was left hanging in the air like a little silver hook. The sun was extraordinarily large and crimson, but then yellowed and contracted. The sky grew pale. Everything for miles around turned white and translucent. Hoarfrost traced a multitude of petals on the ice of the Adun, and the sunbeams sparkled in them with dancing coloured lights.

"Look, they're like diamond flowers growing out of the river bed!" Alexei said in a thrilled tone, turning to Beridze, who was also admiring the scintillating icy traceries.

The river here branched off from the construction line and skirted a close-set ridge

of low hills. As they approached the hills the engineers saw a big bird hovering low over a glade and wheeling sharply in a rather odd manner. Beridze laughed. It was a bird of prey hunting its quarry. A barely distinguishable grey hare darted back and forth across the glade trying to shake off the terrifying shadow of its pursuer that skimmed over the snow. Beridze scared the bird away with a shot from his revolver. The hare scampered off and disappeared behind a hill.

"There, and you said you felt miserable because there wasn't a living creature anywhere around. You wait, we'll come across a bear's den yet somewhere in the underbrush!..."

They proceeded at a slower pace. Beridze began speaking about the taiga, recalling several occasions when he had strayed during his prospectings into jungles so wild that he had given up hope of ever getting out alive.

"At first I didn't understand what difference there was between the taiga and any ordinary forest in central Russia," Alexei said. "There tree species are different, of course—elms, and Manchurian oaks. The wild

life too—there aren't any tigers round about Moscow, not that I have heard of. But that's not the point! I notice many people judge of the taiga by its fringes. But you really don't get to know it until you've been in the thick of it, fallen into its clutches, so to speak. Now, last autumn we went deep into the taiga along the right bank. It isn't a forest at all as we usually imagine it—just a wild riot of vegetation. Huge bare trunks hung about to the very crowns with sinister dark-green or black moss. The treetops are one tangled mass that shut out the sun, and below it's all a dark, stifling deadness—not a bird, not a flower, nor a drop of water in the soil! Something prehistoric about it, dating back to the times when monsters roamed the earth. Those beasts have long since disappeared, but the taiga is still the same. It covers the earth for thousands of miles. The trees stand for centuries, then fall themselves through old age, and new ones grow up in their place. How many wild thickets there are where no living man has ever set foot! There's a really hostile force, if you like, and I'm glad that it has fallen to my lot to wage an active fight against it."

This forceful tirade pleased Beridze.

"I believe that's exactly the attitude towards the taiga which a construction engineer, especially if he's a town dweller, should adopt. But don't you take it into your head to tell that to the native Far-Easterners, especially the hunters. The taiga is their holy of holies, an object of pride."

"I can't understand what there is to be proud of. Can anyone, for instance, be proud of the Sahara? To boast about a factory or a town built in the taiga—now that's another matter! Now that I've begun to see things, it gives me a thrill to think of Novinsk!... I think people in our region are too enamoured of taiga exotics, this bizarre cohabitation of southern Manchurian and northern Okhotsk flora. They look on it as one of the local sights and all but worship it!... I can understand a Moscovite going into raptures over pictures of taiga landscapes, sitting in his apartment on Arbat Street and turning over the pages of the *Ogonyok* illustrated. Very impressive and beautiful, I grant. But no one knows better than the Far-Easterners that these huge tracts occupied by the endless taiga are no more than just blank patches on the map, *terra incognita*. They should be wiped out, not glorified!..."

Beridze emitted a low whistle, scooped up a handful of snow and rolled it into a ball.

"I daresay I sound like a taiga-hater," Alexei said, observing the amused look on his friend's face. "Well, of course, there is a danger of appearing biased. But you see, don't you, that it isn't the forest I object to as such. I know it gives us furs, game, building materials and what not. What I object to most strenuously is the primeval wilds, the thousands of kilometres of impenetrable jungle. Not long ago I borrowed some books from Zalkind by local authors. And would you believe it, nearly all of them wax ecstatic about the taiga! And it isn't only local writers who gush about it. You get the same glowing descriptions of wild vines entwining the tree trunks, of the wonderful birds and beasts, the Golds and Udegei with their primitive customs, canoes hewn out of a single log, cloudberries.... Arsenyev wrote some fine stuff about all this in his time—why repeat him? Why don't the modern authors write about the Golds and Udegei who have graduated institutes and brought a new life to their settlements? Why don't they write verses and novels about men like Terekhov, for instance, and his plant?"

"What's wrong with us two as heroes of some novel?" Beridze asked wickedly and flung his snowball far into the distance.

"I don't know about that. But I'm convinced that our pipe line is a far more worthy subject for literature than all the charms of the primeval forest. I'm for waging an offensive against the taiga and filling in those blank spots on the map. And I want to read about it in books! Let everyone know what a bitter struggle it is. The authors can describe the landscape to their heart's content so long as they don't let the human being get lost in the landscape like a needle in a haystack, or like the way you and I nearly got lost the other day in this confounded jungle. If you ask me, books that deal exclusively with birds and plants, books in which men don't figure at all, aren't literature. It's a sort of phenology in verse and prose!"

Beridze's ski straps had loosened, and he sat down to adjust them. Alexei stood beside him, stamping his feet to keep warm.

"Our pipe line will be the subject of a weighty volume when the job is finished: the Findings of the Final Inspection," Beridze said, looking up at Alexei. "But I'm sure you won't find any mention of Beridze

or Kovshov in it.... I'm not ambitious, Alyosha, but once in a while I call to mind one of Chekhov's stories. Remember the one about the eminent Russian engineer and the no less eminent professor who get into conversation in a train? The engineer is on his way home from the ceremony of the opening of a bridge he has built."

"Yes, I remember. A crowd of people gathered and they all applauded some obscure singer who had also come to attend the ceremony," Alexei caught up. "And the engineer was forgotten in the excitement. Nobody took the slightest notice of him."

"That's just it. That sort of thing is extremely unjust. In our country such injustices have been remedied in real life, but in literature not quite. That applies not only to engineers, but in general to the people who build cities, factories, railways. You are right. How many books have we about such people? The whole Far East is one vast construction site, yet the builders have not been given the place they deserve in literature. Nevelskoy and Muravyov, or Poyarkov and Khabarov were far more fortunate! They say a writer must have perspective in order to treat of complex things. I don't know, I am not competent

to judge, writing is not in my line. But I do know Mayakovsky and love him, and I see that he managed splendidly without perspective. It riles one to think that in the year 2005 some writer will come to what is now the construction site and will dig into the 'fossilized muck,' rummage in the archives and question the oldest inhabitants. Our contemporary writers simply can't tear themselves away from Rubezhansk, they prefer to sit there in the library and write another book about Nevelskoy."

The engineers breasted the hill, leaving behind them a herringbone pattern of tracks in the snow. Alexei, who was in the lead, had propelled himself over the crest, when suddenly the snowdrift caved in under him and he felt himself plunging downwards. He fell on his side with his legs twisted under him, and something crunched under his feet. Alexei lay for a minute stunned, his mind trying to take in what had happened. His face was plastered with soft snow, there was snow under his cap, inside his collar and *valenki*. Seeing nothing, he turned over sharply in an effort to rise. The skis were still on his feet. He took them off after some trouble and thrust them upright into the snow, and pro-

ceeded to look for a way out of the snowdrift. The skis struck some hard object, apparently a sheer wall.

Alexei tried to recollect the configuration of the slope as he had seen it just before he fell. He turned back with great difficulty. After two or three paces the skis ran into the hard obstacle again. He called Beridze loudly, but it was like shouting into a pillow—his mouth was choked with snow. In a sudden fit of anger he began furiously hacking his way to the other side.

Soon he felt that he was choking from lack of air and his own rage. To die here—of all the absurd and senseless things!... He lay still for a while, listening to the hammering of his heart, and fighting to regain composure. He slowly wiped the frozen snow off his face and renewed his efforts to shovel his way out. Floundering in the snow he crawled doggedly forwards, halting for a second to rest, then crawling on again.

Suddenly Alexei heard Beridze's voice, and at the same instant discovered that the darkness around him seemed to be thinning. A streak of light on his left penetrated through the mass of snow. He struck out in that direction with all his strength and felt, even before

he had opened his snow-plastered eyes, that he had broken out into the open at last.

He was a sheet of ice from his cap to his *valenki*. Beridze rushed to him and helped him up, vigorously brushing off the hardened snow. Seeing the whitening patches on his comrade's cheeks and nose, he began rubbing his face.

"Wait, I'll do it myself," Alexei said, his chilled lips barely moving. "You'll make a mess of my face!"

Beridze suddenly put his arm around him and said huskily:

"I was never so upset in my life! You did give me a fright. Damn this accursed spot! It's a wonder you didn't smash your head!"

Kovshov rubbed his face and glanced round at the trap from which he had just escaped. It was a deep cleft in the hillside buried under the snow. The now bared slope ran steeply down. Beridze broke up some dried twigs and hastily started a fire. When Alexei had suddenly disappeared the chief engineer wanted to rush to his aid, but was afraid lest he fall over the side and come toppling down on his comrade's head. While he was searching for a gentler slope he noticed that the snow had slipped in the cleft, and guessed that it had

been caused by Alexei's movements down below, under the heavy snowdrift. He had then swiftly descended the hill.

"What's the matter with your leg?" Beridze asked anxiously, noticing that Alexei limped.

"My foot twisted under me when I fell—it'll be all right. . . ."

The skiers sat down before the fire, and decided to have a bite while they were at it. Kovshov soon warmed up. They looked back upon the adventure now with amusement.

"The Far-Eastern taiga has taken its revenge on you for your uncomplimentary remarks about it," Beridze said laughingly.

Alexei's foot being none the worse for the accident, they continued on their way. Kovshov skied without his sticks which had been left behind where he had fallen; the tips of both skis had been broken off. The engineers' path now lay through a deciduous forest where the trees stood as straight and tall as columns. All life seemed to have frozen here. For a long time the crunching of the snow under their skis was the only sound that broke the stillness of the taiga. Suddenly Beridze stopped to listen as a new sound invaded the silence.

"Lumber workers!" he said.

Before long the whining of saws, the tapping of hammers and swish of falling trees could be distinctly heard. All of a sudden a gay rollicking song echoed over the woods—it reached them as distinctly as if some bird winging overhead were singing it in a boyish pipe:

Cutters down of wood, make sure your axe is true. One, Two!
Till it's evening will you chop and split and hew. One, Two!
When it's evening, then your working day is through. One, Two!
Rest till morning when you'll chop and hew anew. One, Two!

Alexei and Beridze exchanged a smile and quickened their pace. Soon a wide clearing opened before them. A team of lumbermen were cutting a path through the forest, advancing in the direction from which the engineers had come. The felled trees were sawn up on the spot and hauled away by cart. The engineers approached the first couple of workers, one of whom, a scrawny, snub-nosed youngster with mischievous eyes, was singing the gay tune that had attracted Alexei and Beridze to the spot.

His workmate, a strapping lad who towered over the other, was whistling an accompaniment to the song.

The lumbermen paused in their work to accept Beridze's invitation to knock off for a smoke. In a few moments the entire team had gathered around the newcomers. An animated conversation ensued: the engineers asked questions about the progress of the work on the section and the lumber workers wanted to know the latest news from the fronts. The snub-nosed youngster whose name was Fantov, and his giant buddy Shubin boasted to the engineers that they were doing 300 per cent of their quota each.

"Rogov, our chief, has ordered a clearing cut in three days—the section needs a road to the Adun. We're laying in a stock of timber for railroad ties at the same time. I think we'll have the job done in two days," said Shubin.

Alexei reached out for the shining saw in Fantov's hand.

"A regular guitar! You could play a waltz on it," said Fantov proudly.

"The usual double-handled model," was Shubin's more prosaic description. "We keep it in good condition. Oil it with kerosene and see that the teeth are properly set. You'll

notice the tooth points are bent alternately in opposite directions; every fifth tooth is left straight to clear the kerf. We've worked out a sort of method besides. Stand by and watch," he suggested to the engineers. "There's no secret to it. The lumbermen in the other sections might like to try it. Six hundred per cent won't go amissing anywhere!"

Shubin swung his axe and drove it easily into the trunk. The tree shivered and emitted a low hum as if in protest. Having cut a notch, Shubin picked up one end of the saw. The engineers waited expectantly for Fantov to strike up a tune. He obliged with a new version of the same song:

Cutters down of wood, make sure your axe is true.
One, Two!
Put away your axe until the summer's through.
One, Two!
When it's autumn, then it's time to work anew.
One, Two!
Then again take up your axe and chop and hew.
One, Two!

The saw whined tremulously in harmony with the merry song and moved further and further toward the notch. When it had sunk

into the wood, Shubin pressed hard on his end of the saw and turned it sharply. And again the saw responded with a ringing wail. Then Fantov pressed on his end and turned it. The saw moved evenly and very fast. At the last moment Shubin switched it back to its original position.

"Make a note of that, Alyosha. It's a Stakhanovite method, it will come in handy later on," said Beridze. "Simple and effective! That switching around of the saw is done to prevent catching. By turning it around they cut a triangular kerf, with the apex pointing toward the heart of the tree. You watch, they're almost through. It runs smoothly and the base of the tree doesn't get spoiled."

The tree began to topple over to one side.

"Look out there, comrades engineers!" shouted Fantov.

Moving faster and faster as it approached the ground, the tree dropped gently into a snowdrift, spraying the lumbermen with powdery snow shaken from its crown.

At noon Beridze and Kovshov came out onto the "winter track"—a broad well-levelled ice road, along which, at intervals of every

three kilometres, there stood roughly built wooden huts—blockposts fitted with selector telephone and telegraph facilities. Trucks, some loaded with pipes, others empty, raced back and forth along the road. Horses with rime-covered muzzles and flanks hauled sledges loaded with sundry service supplies such as hay, thermos containers with hot food, and firewood.

Close to the road the skiers saw a small settlement, and turned towards it at once. These settlements housed the construction personnel and served as bases all along the construction line. It was pleasant to see amid the taiga the freshly logged barracks, bathhouse, kitchen, foreman's office, and portable power plant under a shed. It seemed as though the carpenters had only just departed with their axes, after having tidied up and cleared the shavings.

The settlement proved to be deserted, except for the caretakers on duty and the kitchen staff. All the rest, including the job superintendent, were out on the line. In one of the barracks the engineers found five sick men—three were down with the grippe and two with frostbite. The engineers chatted with them for a while. The barracks looked rather poor,

their furnishings consisting solely of bunks, iron stoves and long tables with benches. But they were warm and clean, and Beridze exclaimed with pleasure: "Quite suitable to winter in! Good lad, Rogov!"

The engineers sampled the fresh, still hot bread in the settlement's bakery. In the kitchen the cook Nogtev complained to them about the shortage of utensils and crockery. Seeing that porridge and fish (and what fish —carp!) were being cooked for dinner, Beridze exclaimed: "Now, this is not bad at all!"

Nogtev, wishing to make the most of the chiefs' visit, began to warm to his subject. Why, if they'd only give what he needed he'd cook better meals than you'd get in any restaurant! It transpired that he had formerly worked in the Novinsk restaurant "Adun," but had volunteered for work on the construction job "to feed the famous builders."

Beridze made no promises, but he was pleased with everything he saw and kept repeating:

"No, not bad at all! The food's excellent."

The chief engineer was delighted with the little bathhouse with its coopered water vats and similar little basins for washing in. He had a good mind to take a bath, but

was reluctantly induced to postpone it when he heard that he would have to wait until the water was heated up.

The unfinished buildings of the motor park—a tool-shed, a big garage and a house for the truck drivers and mechanics—were situated near the settlement. There was an acrid smell here of benzine, oil and rubber. Workers were busy around trucks standing under repairs.

Several trucks with trailers, some of them loaded with pipes, stood lined up outside the dispatch office. Beridze and Alexei looked in here too. Drivers in oil-stained sheepskin coats sat warming themselves before a red-hot stove.

After a lull occasioned by the entrance of the strangers, the men round the stove resumed their talk about the transportation of the pipes. They unanimously agreed in strong terms that they had never transported such heavy and awkward loads before.

The dispatcher, a strapping girl with amazingly rosy cheeks, wearing an unbuttoned padded jacket, amiably invited the engineers to warm themselves.

"A touch of frostbite?" she asked Alexei with a fleeting glance at his face.



The supply stocks of the section were concentrated at a large base on the banks of the Adun, where they were delivered from Novinsk partly by water during the navigation season and partly by the ice road by car. Now the materials had to be conveyed down the line and the pipes strung out in a single chain. The section builders were now principally engaged in transportation work. Some were permanently occupied on winter-track maintenance, while others loaded the pipes and materials and still others transported them by truck and horse trains.

The transportation of equipment was now the chief job at all the sections. Beridze and Kovshov took a special interest in it. They had taken note of every single pipe and stack along the line. Therefore, upon making the acquaintance of the drivers, they joined in the conversation.

"Your place isn't any better than Section Four. It's the same story everywhere," Alexei said. "There are a lot of pipes scattered about along the roadsides. You come across them all the time. They've been thrown out en route because of some breakdown perhaps, or through sheer negligence on the part of the drivers. It's become a serious matter.

comrades! I've estimated that at least one-third of all the pipes have been dropped this way at your section. Something must be done about it, otherwise we'll get all mixed up in the count and be dragging them from place to place."

"You've got to be stricter with the drivers," said Musya Kuchina, the girl dispatcher. "I bet they wouldn't throw their load overboard if it was butter you gave them to carry. They're kid-gloved gentlemen—as soon as anything goes wrong, they simply chuck the pipes overboard, and that's that!"

"You can't say that about everybody!" protested truck driver Solntsev. He had an expressive face with a large nose and thoughtful-looking, slightly prominent eyes. "We don't all do that, of course. But the main reason why pipes are dropped is that they're such a clumsy load. Before you know it you've landed in a ditch. And there's nothing to do but throw the pipes out."

The engineers had good reason to be worried about the transportation of the pipes, and the drivers had no less reason to complain about it. As many as a hundred pipes, each eleven metres long and weighing about a ton, had to be strung out in a single chain

over every kilometre of ground. They had to be conveyed long distances. It was a freight that could only be delivered on good roads. But good roads the builders did not yet have.

The construction chiefs had set the works' sections a difficult but clear-cut task. They had impressed upon the men that unless the hauling of the pipes was completed in the wintertime, so that the welding of the pipes could begin early in spring, the building of the pipe line would be hopelessly delayed since when spring set in the roads would be impassable and much time would be lost in building summer roads, leaving little time or labour resources for the main work on the pipe line.

"I'm not saying that transporting the pipes is an easy job. I say that you men try to lighten your task when you shouldn't," Musya argued with the drivers. "Makhov is the only one who's fulfilling his quota—I ought to know that better than anyone. He had only two unsuccessful trips in the last three days. And how many drop-offs have you got to your account, Solntsev? You drive the same kind of truck but you get different results. Why is that?"

Musya glanced with obvious sympathy at a driver with blue eyes sitting by the window.

"You ask Makhov himself why he's such a lucky fellow," Solntsev retorted. "I have an idea that you put down all the drop-offs to his account just because you happen to like him. He chucks 'em overboard and you credit him with them just the same."

The drivers burst out laughing.

"Now then, Solntsev, don't get personal," Makhov said in a level quiet tone.

"Perhaps I do put them down to him. You try to prove it and we'll see who's right!" Musya retorted, her eyes flashing with mischief.

"By the way, how do you keep account of the number of pipes delivered and undelivered?" Beridze asked Musya.

"We have a blockpost every three kilometres down the track with a checker who controls the freightage and generally looks after things within his three-kilometre zone. The checker, together with the phone dispatchers, make an entry of every truck. The driver gets the pipes at the base and has to deliver them to the last stack. If he drops them on the way the checker immediately makes a note

of it. Afterwards all the checkers report to me how many pipes each man has delivered and how many he's dropped."

"All shipshape and watertight—not a loophole anywhere!" laughed Solntsev. "Our engineer, Pribytkov, introduced that system—he's a regular old stickler. To get round that system you've got to get to windward of Musya and those checkers, which is easier said than done!"

Makhov consulted his wrist watch and got up.

"Well, boys, we've had a warm up and now let's be off."

The driver stole a tender look at Musya as he went out. She responded with a smile.

Solntsev offered to give the engineers a lift as far as the base—he and Makhov were going back to load up. Beridze climbed into the driver's cab beside him. Alexei got in with Makhov.

"It's too bad about those pipes, Comrade Makhov!" said Alexei. "They're giving us so much trouble! The chief engineer is right—if we get them strung out by spring you may consider half the pipe line finished."

"I don't know about other places, but at Section Five the pipes will be hauled out in time." There was a ring of confidence but no trace of boasting in Makhov's words.

They raced past a kilometre-long line of piping laid end to end in one continuous chain. Alexei looked at the black line stretched along the snow and the sight cheered him.

"I'd like to see a sausage like that stretching all the way to the island!"

"It's a good bit yet to the island!" the driver answered. "A tremendous job, this pipe line!"

"There it is again!" Alexei cried in annoyance, catching sight of some pipes lying jumbled by the stack. "How do you manage to deliver all the pipes to their proper places, Comrade Makhov? How is it that you can do it and the others can't?"

"Oh, just a bit of wangling," Makhov answered. He looked ahead with a smile of amusement. "I have as many drop-outs as Solntsev, only I've been able to come to an arrangement with Musya and the checkers."

Alexei saw that Makhov was joking. He had taken a liking to the young truck driver

with his confident air, intelligent glance and pleasant face.

"Have you been long at this driver's job?"

"About five years. I went to work in a garage after I finished school. True, I gave it up for a short time—I have a gift for music, and started attending a music school last year—played in the town orchestra. I'm from Blagoveshchensk myself—born and educated there."

"What made you drop music?"

"They didn't take me into the army because I'm flat-footed. And I couldn't stick it in the orchestra, fiddling with the keys of an accordion and blowing into a trumpet when my comrades were risking their lives at the front. I felt ashamed of it. I asked the Komsomol Committee to send me out to some construction job. They told me at the time that though it wasn't the front it was also a battle, a battle for oil. Now that I've been up against these winter roads, sweating and all but dragging this here bus on my back, I can see what they meant...."

"D'you know what, Comrade Makhov, I've just had an idea how to reorganize this pipe transportation," Alexei said suddenly.

"Let's put our heads together and see whether it will work or not."

It had so far been the practice at all the works' sections to transport the pipes from the base outwards, delivering them to the nearest point and going farther and farther out each trip. This meant that in the event of a breakdown occurring short of the destination point the pipes were dumped where they were not wanted. It occurred to Alexei that if the deliveries were made "inwards" that is, carried out to the farthest point with subsequent curtailed trips towards the base where the pipes were loaded on the trucks, the forced unloading of the pipes short of the point of delivery would not involve a waste of effort, as they would be if left to be transported out by later trips.

"That's a good one!" exclaimed Makhov, staring at Alexei in amazement.

"Think it will work? We must try it out. Logically it seems all right."

"You don't have to try it out, it's been done already," Makhov answered, surprise still showing on his face.

"Who tried it out? Where?"

"I did! This is the third day I've been transporting these pipes 'inwards,' the way you're

suggesting. Funny the way the same idea can occur to two different people, isn't it? And just imagine, I called it the 'inwards' method too."

"You really mean it?" It was Alexei's turn to be surprised. "But my dear man, why are you keeping it to yourself? Don't you want your mates to share the secret?"

"That's not the point—I make no secret of it! You see, it's like this.... When the idea struck me I immediately consulted Polishchuk, our transport chief. He wasn't taken by the idea. He thought it didn't sound right to drive so far out when there were no pipes nearer at hand. Transportation had only just been started and the checking system organized, and this meant changing everything again! He flatly refused."

"And you made arrangements with Musya and the checkers?" Alexei said with a laugh.

"Exactly. I wanted to carry on for another two or three days on the quiet, to make sure of it, and then tell everyone about it. Since the same idea has occurred to you, you'd better propose it to Rogov and Polishchuk yourself. As a matter of fact I'd prefer to keep in the background. Polishchuk

wouldn't forgive me for acting against his orders."

"Nonsense! We'll do it the other way round—present a claim to Polishchuk for not having tumbled to your proposal right away. We'll introduce this 'inwards' method everywhere, and I'd like to see anyone raising objections!"

Upon arriving at the base the engineers took leave of Makhov and Solntsev. The drivers began loading pipes for the next trip, and Kovshov and Beridze proceeded on their way. Alexei told Beridze enthusiastically about Makhov's proposal. Beridze saw the advantages of it at once.

"This 'inwards' method will provide a good fillip, you'll see," he said. "Good boys, you two."

The timber mill lay hidden somewhere on the right behind the trees, from whence came the rhythmic throbbing of the engine and the strident song of the saws biting into the logs. Beridze stood listening and his face beamed.

"Lovely music! Better than Mozart! Don't you think so, Alexei?"

"Look, Georgi, an accident!" the latter exclaimed.

At a bend in the winter track in front of them a truck loaded with pipes had got the side of its trailer caught in the driver's cab of an oncoming car. Both trucks had swerved round and were now barring the roadway. The truck drivers stood in the middle of the road swearing at each other. Traffic was jammed. New trucks drew up, and a sledge train was trying to squeeze itself through.

No one noticed in the hubbub that the driver's mate sitting in the damaged car had been hurt. Then someone heard him moaning. There was a general rush for the truck, the injured man was dragged out of the cabin and carried over to an empty truck. Reconciled, as it were, by this incident they all applied themselves with vigour to throwing the pipes off the trailer. One of the pipes fell with a bump into the roadway and rolled towards the sledge train which stood waiting for the road to clear. The horses, frightened by the black monster rolling towards them, snorted and reared. The sound of snapping sledges could be heard.

The engineers ran up and took matters in hand. Alexei ordered the horses to be moved out of the way. Beridze said something to the truck drivers.

"Come on, black beard, chuck those skis and give us a hand with the pipes, or else buzz off!" the irate driver told him.

"It's a damn scandal—stop that at once! Put the trailer straight and load the pipes back again!" Beridze shouted, throwing off his skis.

"Who are you, bossing the show?" the driver demanded angrily.

"Don't you shout at him, he's the chief engineer of the construction!" Alexei flung in, grinning at his own unexpected outburst. "Now then, comrades, back your trucks out of the way. We'll put this noisy fellow's trailer straight and load it up again. He'll deliver those pipes whether he likes it or not."

A few minutes later traffic was restored.

"I'm sorry for that lad—he's quite a youngster," Alexei said. "He's been badly crushed."

"Our casualties," Beridze said with a deep sigh. "The battle for the pipe line takes its toll too, Alexei. . . ."

Alexei glanced at the dark snowbound forest bordering the road, and had a mental picture of Mitya crawling towards a wooden bridge with a grenade in his hand. Kovshov

had made up a parcel before leaving Novinsk (some tinned food, warm socks, *makhorka*—his kid brother had probably started smoking already!) and asked Zhenya Kozlova to post it to the school.

"Poor kid," Alexei repeated.

"I'll never forget Stalin's sorrowful words on that score," Beridze whispered. He, too, was thinking of the great sacrifices of the war.

CHAPTER TWO

ROGOV'S HEADQUARTERS

IT WAS about five kilometres to Tyvlin, the Nanai village where Rogov and his staff were quartered. The engineers dropped in at the next blockpost to warm themselves and find out where Rogov was. The dispatcher sprang to his feet with a military salute as soon as they came in.

"Whom are you saluting?" Beridze asked.

"The chief engineer and his assistant," the dispatcher answered promptly. "We've been looking out for you all the time. Our chief is waiting for you at his headquarters. He got a report by selector about the way you handled the truck drivers."

The dispatcher hurried back to the selector apparatus and donned the earphones.

"Here, let me talk with Rogov—put me through," Beridze said.

"You'll have to wait a bit, Comrade Beridze, the chief is talking to him."

"What chief?"

"Why, Batmanov."

Judging by the eagerness with which the dispatcher listened and by the smile on his face, Beridze guessed that the conversation was an interesting one. He put on a spare set of earphones.

"I'm asking you, Comrade Rogov," boomed Batmanov's voice, "why haven't you carried out my orders?"

"Yes, Vasili Maximovich . . ." Rogov's voice answered.

"What do you mean 'yes'?" Batmanov broke in. "Let's start from the beginning again. You have commandeered ten trucks that were sent out for Section Seven. I ordered you to return them at once. Where are they?"

"Vasili Maximovich, it's not my fault that Section Seven is in no hurry to take them over. They don't send their men down for them."

"Don't think you can deceive me, Rogov! I've got the man standing here who was sent down to you yesterday for those trucks. He couldn't find you, though he spent the whole day looking for you. Quite a mystery!"

Beridze pressed the earphones closer. The dispatcher sat listening with such rapt attention that even his lips moved with excitement.

"That's not my fault! They shouldn't send stupid men down!"

"That's enough, Rogov! What do you take me for? I know perfectly well why he was unable to find you. You thought Batmanov wouldn't know about it and you'd wangle it so as to have the use of the trucks for two or three days to transport an extra couple of hundred pipes with."

"That's not fair, Vasili Maximovich!"

"Comrade Rogov!" Batmanov's voice had a ring of exasperation in it. "You will please collect those trucks and run them down yourself to Section Seven tomorrow."

"Why myself? I've got my hands full as it is. . . ."

"Don't let me have to repeat the order!"

"Very good!"

"And don't let that happen again! I want to remind you about an unpleasant fish incident."

"Vasili Maximovich, my subordinates are listening to the conversation."

"Afraid I'll injure your prestige? Don't worry. Nobody will damage your reputation

unless you do so yourself. Aren't you afraid of damaging your prestige by making free with trucks that don't belong to you and putting a spoke in your comrades' wheel when you are in friendly competition with them?"

"Vasili Maximovich, I remind you again.... We're not alone."

"All right, we'll talk in private." After a short pause Batmanov sharply commanded: "Hang up your receivers, everybody on the line!"

The dispatcher hastily laid down the earphones and stepped over to the window. This tickled Beridze, he motioned to Alexei to put them on.

"Please postpone this conversation for another time, Vasili Maximovich," Rogov said. "Someone's listening in just the same."

"Let them listen, if they're so unscrupulous."

Beridze and Kovshov grinned. Alexei held the earphones with one hand and stroked his slightly frostbitten face with the other. It had become flushed from the warmth and was beginning to swell and feel sore.

"I can tell your subordinates," Batmanov went on, "that I respect their chief as a re-

sourceful and capable manager. At the same time he takes liberties that smack of anarchy and cannot be tolerated on our ice highway."

"Vasili Maximovich, you're not fair to me!" Rogov cried.

"Have you been fair to me?" Batmanov shot back. "Did you think about me when you started this game? Did you imagine that I would put up with such goings on?" Batmanov paused, then went on in a calmer tone. "Now about that fish. I didn't believe it when I was told that you had been a party to the business. Now I do. That's all. This business with the trucks I'll never forget!"

"Comrade Chief, I must see you at once. I'm coming out right away. May I?" implored Rogov.

"You'll do nothing of the kind. I've got no more to say. Now please carry out my order. And mind you don't try to palm off bad trucks instead of the good ones."

"Vasili Maximovich!" Rogov cried desperately, but the line was silent. He could be heard heaving a sigh and gnashing his teeth.

The engineers hurried to reach Tyvlin in time to catch Rogov while he was still there. On the way Beridze recalled the selector conversation and shook his head.

"What's that business about the fish?" Alexei asked.

"I heard something about it. Zalkind told the story to Batmanov in my presence. The year before last Rogov was manager of a fishery on the lower reaches of the Adun. During the dog salmon running several of the local managers got together and fixed up some sort of contraption for driving the fish into their crawls. In this way they contrived to fulfil their yearly plan by two hundred per cent each at one go. But they scared the fish off and many of the dog salmon didn't ascend the river. They say that the fisheries on the upper reaches were unable to fulfil their plan because of it."

"That's a shabby trick! Do you mean to say Rogov was capable of doing a thing like that?" Alexei asked in astonishment. "I can't believe it."

"Those smart fishermen were put on trial. They got their deserts. But Rogov proved that he wasn't involved in the affair. Zalkind, in relating the story, also thought that Rogov had nothing to do with it."

The winter track turned off to the right, in the direction of the river. The engineers took a short cut by way of one of the foot-

paths. Round holes, large and small, stood out darkly in the ice of the river. The water in them steamed and gurgled with a silvery tinkling sound. Some Nanais were busy around the ice holes, pulling out and lowering their fishing tackle. Heaps of stiffened fish—pike, gibels and carp—lay on the ice. The fish froze stiff the instant they were pulled out of the water, before they could even stir.

Next to one of the ice holes several men were tying the tackle to thick wooden spikes planted across the hole. The rest—in a body—were holding the rope. Something huge was thrashing about in the water, lashing it up in waves, while the fishermen lurched from side to side, barely able to keep a grip on the tackle.

The skiers stopped and watched the scene with interest. An old Nanai in fur boots, fur cap and fur jacket sat near-by. He was calmly hauling fish out of the hole, one after another, landing them by means of a simple "thrower"—an ordinary hook on a thick string tied to a stick. The Nanai looked up at the engineers and said in an expressionless voice:

"We've caught a big fish. We think maybe *kaluga*.... Very heavy to pull—look, how

many men pulling. I guess we must call out motor car. It is good to make such big catch —plenty food for Red Army."

The *kaluga*, a species of sturgeon, is the largest fish in the Adun and sometimes weighs well over a ton. Overcoming their curiosity to see the fish landed, the engineers reluctantly hurried on A crowd of small boys trailed after them, their number increasing as they went along. Some of them scuttled on ahead and others came running down towards them. They stared with shining coal-black eyes at the strangers, especially at Beridze with his white-rimed beard. The little Nanais were accompanied by shaggy, fierce-looking dogs who dashed about excitedly without, however, paying any attention to the newcomers.

"Expedition come!" the youngsters shouted. "Expedition come!"

"They mean us—'expedition come,'" Beridze said with a laugh "By the way, you'll get a chance of seeing the new Golds here. I advise you to observe their life and customs at Tyvlin. It's one of their biggest camps on the Adun.... They had to skip from the Stone Age straight into ours, the Soviet Age. A people with such a destiny will repay your

interest. You'll see things you won't read of in any books and which you certainly won't see in the Moscow region! I visited the place while I was out prospecting, but I suppose everything has changed in Tyvlin these last few years."

The village came into view immediately round the bend. It stood on the left bank towering high over the Adun. The whole village was smoking. The smoke rose above the roofs in almost straight, motionless pillars, and the sunbeams painted them in changing colours of pink, flaming scarlet and gold. On the blue wintry sky it seemed like a festive illumination.

At the edge of the village on the ice of the river a group of Nanais awaited the engineers. One of them, wearing a sheepskin coat, taller than the rest, with a broad face and high cheekbones, stepped forward and introduced himself as the chairman of the village Soviet, Maxim Hodger. He greeted the new arrivals with a carefully articulated little speech.

"You obviously take us for some expedition or other. We belong to the construction

job," Beridze said. "We're on our way to see Rogov—have you heard of him?"

Hodger and the rest of the Nanais laughed heartily, a laugh that was childlike in its spontaneity.

"We also belong to the construction job," Hodger answered. "We are at one with Rogov. He helps us, and we help him. And we've heard a lot about you too, Comrade Beridze. Rogov told us about you," the Nanai added with almost solemn deference. "We know that you have transferred the construction line to our bank, and all the Nanai folk are grateful to you for the road to Novinsk. Come into my fanza and have a rest."

Beridze, visibly moved and flattered, answered that he and his comrade would gladly avail themselves of the invitation, but they must first see Rogov. The Nanais accompanied the engineers through the village in a crowd. It resembled an ordinary Russian village with a long broad street flanked by sturdy log houses. Hodger had probably called them fanzas by force of habit, for there was not a sign here of any of those squat huts and little sheds on piles which the engineers had met in the other Nanai camps along the Adun. Only the dog teams and sledges stand-

ing under the sheds indicated that this was a Nanai village. Besides, few of the houses had the fenced-in front gardens which are an invariable attribute of the Russian village. Neither were there any draw wells—the Nanais took their water from the river.

Hodger invited Beridze and Kovshov so cordially to look at the hospital they passed on the way, that they did not have the heart to refuse him. It was a small building, very warm and spotlessly clean. The engineers made the acquaintance of the house physician, an elderly Russian woman, and her assistant, a young Nanai girl named Valya They visited the nursery too, where the mothers were just taking their babies home amid a loud hubbub. The guests looked in at the school with its two spacious classrooms and brand new desks.

Hodger gave the visitors a brief account of life in the village and informed them with pride how much fur and fish the kolkhoz had contributed to the defence fund, and how much produce they had collected from their vegetable plots. Meanwhile the crowd continued to grow The chairman shooed away the too curious youngsters. They scattered, laughing, but still hung on. They were

joined by grownups and even old men. They came out of their houses and stared at the engineers with frank curiosity. Alexei noticed that except for the old men and women who wore dark or gaily coloured embroidered garments, the Nanais were dressed no differently from townsfolk.

Hodger, who had been eyeing Alexei's broken skis for some time, said in a business-like tone:

"I see your skis have suffered badly. Never mind, we'll give you another pair, good ones. It'll be our gift to you." Saying which, he took the engineers' skis and handed them to a lad walking at his side, with an order: "Put them away as a keepsake. Tell Stepan to pick out the best skis and bring them to me in the morning."

"I had an acquaintance here, an old man named Mafa. I wonder if he's still alive?" Beridze enquired, and explained to Alexei: "That was another Dersu Uzala.* He acted as guide to many expeditions. We used his services many times. He was very old at the time, I remember."

* Dersu Uzala—hero of V. Arsenyev's (1872-1930) book of the same title— was an intrepid hunter and pathfinder.

"Oh, Mafa! Yes, he's alive. He's turned a hundred and ten. All he does now is sleep and scratch himself!" a lad from behind cried out. Everyone laughed, and the lad hid himself behind his comrades.

"Alive? That's fine!" Beridze cried gladly. "I must look him up. I need him and the other old men—I want to consult them."

"Mafa will start raking up Governor-General Muravyov!" the same voice sang out from the crowd.

"What are you hiding there for, Volodya?" Hodger called out, and explained with a note of pride: "That's my nephew. He's studying at the technical school in Rubezhansk, and has come home for his holidays.... This is where Comrade Rogov is," he said, pointing. "His men live in our fanzas."

Rogov's staff occupied five houses at the end of the village. Facing the office of the section chief was the village Soviet. Hodger showed the engineers his own house standing near-by, took their knapsacks from them and went away.

Rogov, standing in the middle of a room occupied by two tables and benches, received the engineers rather coolly, much less affably than he usually spoke with them over

the phone. He introduced the other occupants of the room—Khlynov, his assistant, Polishchuk, the transport manager, and Kotenev, the Party organization secretary.

"We've met before," Alexei said to Polishchuk. "You're a river man, aren't you? Have you changed your profession?"

"I've only got three little cutters here, and they're under repairs. Got to do something with myself in the meantime," Polishchuk answered good-humouredly. He caught Rogov's stern glance—expressive of annoyance that he had been left out of the conversation—and drew himself up military fashion. "May I go?"

"You go into that business with Polishchuk while we're talking here," Rogov said to Khlynov.

Khlynov and Polishchuk went out into the next room. Alexei, who had met Rogov only on two or three brief occasions, studied him now with interest. Rogov's sturdily built figure, trimly set off by a yellow leather jacket with a zipper fastener, had a quality of vital force about it. His face, with its square jaw, wide-set eyes and straight nose, roughened and darkened by constant exposure to the frosts, was manly and energetic.

"He is stern forsooth, the voivode of Tyvlin!" Beridze declaimed, eyeing his host with approval.

Rogov, looking gloomy and preoccupied, did not respond to this sally. It occurred to the engineers that this cold reception must be due to the section chief's recent stormy conversation with Batmanov.

"Why didn't you go and take a rest?" Rogov asked almost surlily, and threw a searching and somewhat hostile look at Alexei. "In a hurry to take it out of me, comrades chiefs? You'll have plenty of time!"

"Well, if it's coming to you, we'll take it out of you, as you say," Beridze answered, instantly becoming grave. "There's nothing wrong in having a row now and again, Alexander Ivanovich, so long as the work benefits by it. I shouldn't anticipate events, though, if I were you—why ask for it?"

"Go ahead with it, it's your business to bawl folks out!" Rogov said with a wave of the hand which set the leather of his jacket creaking. "I know myself that things are bad at my section. Extra pipes dropped about all over the place! Warehouses not solidly built! Workers' barracks not cosy enough. I don't look ahead, have no taste for planning, and

don't know what I'll be doing a month from now. Aren't I right? I just got hell for that from Batmanov, now it's your turn!"

Kotenev, vainly trying to smooth down a mop of wavy reddish hair, listened to the section chief with disapproval and tried to catch his eye in order to stop him.

"What's the idea, Alexander Ivanovich?" he said at last.

Beridze, who had sat down by the table, got to his feet again.

"You've started on the wrong track, Rogov. You're hotheaded, but I'm still more so—I'm a Caucasian, you know. We'll quarrel in no time. Come on, Alexei Nikolayevich, let's go to Hodgers', and give the man a chance to cool down."

He made for the door, with Alexei following. Rogov was at the door in a flash, barring their path.

"It'll be a deadly insult if you go away, Georgi Davydovich! I won't let you! Better swear at me, or hit me even—anything but that."

Beridze regarded him attentively.

"Then let it be understood, Rogov, that we've come here as representatives of headquarters and not just on a family visit. Then

we shan't have any need to come to blows. . . ."

The engineers went back to the table. Rogov resumed his seat. Alexei and Beridze conversed in low tones. Rogov sat watching them for a minute or two, then he went out together with Kotenev.

His slightly hoarse voice could be heard through the thin partition:

"Call the doctor's assistant here! And give orders for dinner to be brought for the head office representatives."

"What's the doctor's assistant for? Does he intend taking a nerve tonic?" laughed Alexei.

The engineers could hear everything that was going on in the next room.

"What's the sense in showing your temper, Alexander Ivanovich?" Kotenev was saying. "You certainly had it coming to you for those trucks. We'll have something more to say about it at the Party meeting too."

"Don't rub it in, Kotenev! I feel rotten enough as it is!" Rogov exclaimed.

There was a confused murmur, then Rogov could be heard again:

"Polishchuk, you and the mechanic overhaul the trucks thoroughly, I'll take them

down to Section Seven myself first thing in the morning."

"We won't have time, Alexander Ivanovich. All the trucks are out on the road. Some of them are at the other end of the section and won't get back before tomorrow," Polishchuk protested. "Nothing will happen if they stay here an extra couple of days."

Rogov swore.

"I'll give you an extra couple of days! Confound those dratted trucks! I've about had enough of them, and I don't want any more. You do as I tell you. Yes, and bring down all the drivers who get back to the garage by nightfall I'll have a word to say to them."

Beridze sang out:

"Alexander Ivanovich! You needn't whisper there, we know all about the truck business. Come back here and issue your orders out loud."

Rogov came back and sat down to the table without glancing at the engineers. Polishchuk, Khlynov and Kotenev came in too.

"Get going," Rogov said to Polishchuk. "And be quick about it!"

"Right," said the latter, and disappeared.

Two women in white aprons came into the room carrying trays with plates and dishes

In a minute they had laid the table in front of the engineers.

"Oho, fried *kaluga*! This must be the same one they were hauling out of the ice hole. Don't you think so, Alexei?"

Beridze attacked the fish with relish.

"We've all heard what Batmanov said," Rogov growled, addressing Khlynov, "but nothing is being done about it. You're waiting until we have our faces pushed again into all the same sharp corners! Two days ago we were told that living conditions were tolerable but that they had to be better than that. Have you forgotten, Khlynov? Have the barracks been made comfortable? The bathhouse and the kitchen were also mentioned. I told you to put men on the job and get benches, tables and cupboards made."

"We're doing everything, Alexander Ivanovich," Khlynov said.

"Yes, but how! You'll mess about with those trifles half a year when I've been allowed an hour for them! That trip with the trucks down to Section Seven will take me two days. See that you make the most of it."

On his way out Khlynov almost collided with a young Nanai girl in a squirrel coat

and hat who burst into the office. Her animated face was flushed from running. The engineers recognized her as the doctor's assistant, Valya, whom they had seen at the hospital.

"Where's the patient?" she asked in a ringing voice.

"Have a look, Valya. Comrade Kovshov here has been frostbitten, he needs attending to," Rogov said gruffly.

It dawned on Alexei that it was he who was the object of Rogov's solicitude. The girl went up to Alexei, and ignoring his protests, lifted his feverish and slightly swollen face with cool fingers. Alexei found himself admiring her amazingly long eyelashes.

"It's good you rubbed it with snow," Valya said. "Otherwise you'd have gone about with a black face. We'll put some ointment on your cheeks and nose and it will get better." She looked into Alexei's eyes. "It will heal before you get back to Novinsk. Your girl will not even notice anything. And now let's see your hands. Humph, this is more serious! She won't like this at all." The girl spoke Russian fluently, with a barely perceptible accent.

"I haven't got a girl, Valya."

"I don't believe it," Valya answered with a giggle, and ran away to fetch the ointment.

Rogov silently paced the room, his eyes still avoiding the engineers. Beridze was smoking his pipe. Alexei drew a sheet of paper out of his case to sketch a plan of pipe transportation "inwards."

"You should have seen what things were like here when I came out on that stranded barge! Kotenev can tell you," Rogov suddenly blurted out in a hollow voice, addressing no one in particular. "Polishchuk and I crossed the river twice from bank to bank over the sludge ice and took a freezing bath—nearly got drowned. . . . Half the section was on one bank, half on the other. The section chief was on the booze all the time in the company of a set of scoundrels like himself, making free with the property, and generally going on the rampage. They antagonized the Nanais. The men were having a wretched time, living in cold and hunger—it hurt to look at them!... What was to be done? We talked it over with Kotenev and decided that I was to stay here. Afterwards Batmanov endorsed it post factum. The District Party Committee helped us to settle the hash of those blackguards. Then Kotenev and I called on the

Nanais.... They were disgusted with the old section chief and didn't trust me at first—they did afterwards. Then the river froze at last and we moved out all the property to the left bank, fixed up the road and went ahead with building the settlement...."

Rogov paced swiftly up and down the room and his speech came in painful jerks. The engineers listened with sympathy. Alexei was reminded of Batmanov's first acquaintance with Rogov and the latter's impulsive behaviour.

"What you did was no more than your duty," Kotenev interrupted him. "What's the use of bringing all this up?"

"Yes, what I did was my duty, I couldn't help doing it," Rogov went on. "It wasn't for Batmanov, of course, that I went without sleep, worked like a cart horse and had the devil of a time. It's wartime, and everyone's got to do his bit of fighting!... But I thought about Batmanov a good deal—a kind word from him means everything to me. You won't understand me, Kotenev, because your attitude to him is different. Ever since I got to know him I've become strongly attached to him. I'm ready to give my soul for him, honestly! And there are many more besides me

at the section who feel the same about him.... What am I compared to him? A youngster!" Rogov slewed round. "Yet I succeeded in getting him to say a kind word about me. 'I'm pleased with you, Rogov, you're doing well out here. Thanks. I'm glad I wasn't mistaken in you.' And today it's all gone by the board! 'You haven't been fair to me,' he said. Oh, what a dunderhead I am!" He struck his forehead with the palm of his hand. "One foolish act can wipe out a year's honest work!... Those trucks! Why, I'd be glad to give my own trucks away and drag the pipes on my own back. What does he think of me now? He brought up that fish business too." He lurched towards Beridze. "Georgi Davydovich, believe me, I had nothing to do with that fish affair. As for the trucks—well, I did sidetrack them. But how did it happen? Two or three of them began to act funny while they were being driven down, and the drivers came to me for help and got it promptly. Then I figured it out, damn it, that the trucks would stand idle for a time at Section Seven anyhow, and I decided to make use of them for hauling pipes...."

"You acted wrongly in the case of those trucks, Alexander Ivanovich," Beridze said

sternly, "and I wouldn't try to make excuses if I were you."

"I'm not making excuses, I'm pleading guilty. Kotenev warned me, but I didn't listen to him. I'll never forgive myself for it!... Tell me, Georgi Davydovich, how can I make it up with Batmanov now? He doesn't even want to see me. We spoke over the phone, and we seemed to be standing face to face. To disgrace myself at such a time!..."

Rogov sank onto a bench with lowered head. His sudden confession touched Alexei. Aware of a growing sympathy towards this strong impulsive man, Alexei suddenly remembered Olga. This was just the man she needed in the injured pride of her unhappy love! He placed them mentally side by side, and wondered at the blindness of fate which joined two people together caring little whether they suited each other or not, and frequently kept others apart who were born for one another.

Kotenev asked Beridze how work was progressing on the construction plans and how the engineers had found things at the other sections they had visited.

"Are Rogov and Pribytkov hitting it off now?" the chief engineer enquired.

"Yes, they're all right. You wrote them both about it, I believe?"

"I did, and in pretty strong terms."

"Rogov's got such a temper that not a day passes by smoothly. The man's bursting with energy! But old Pribytkov's not the kind to take things lying down. I have to act as arbiter now and then. I've studied them both and know how to patch up things between them. Anyway, we're working—after all, we're Communists, and wherever our tempers may drive us we see eye to eye in the end."

Valya came back with a jar of ointment. Maxim Hodger came in with her. The chairman of the village Soviet sat down in silence at the table and puffed at his pipe. Valya greased Alexei's face and hands, and in a minute the engineer was shining like a burnished Mongolian idol. Her work finished, the girl sat down beside Hodger and surveyed the guests with interest.

"Ah, well, it's time to get down to business, can't afford to waste more than five minutes on the blues," Rogov said with a sigh, and turned to Hodger. "What is it, chairman? Want to see me about something? Out with it!"

"We want Comrade Beridze to come to our place. Comrade Kovshov as well. They wanted to see the old men—I've got them all together, Mafa has come too."

"Not now, Hodger, a little later. We've got some business to attend to first. And you, doctor, what are you fluttering your eyes at Kovshov for? You're wasting your time—he has a sweetheart in town, a beautiful girl who beats you hollow!"

Alexei detected a faint note of bitterness in this humourous sally and glanced at Rogov in surprise.

"I wasn't fluttering at anyone, Comrade Chief I've got a young man of my own—don't you remember me seeing him off to the front?" Valya retorted archly. She stole another look at Kovshov's shiny face and ran out.

"Alexander Ivanovich, our fishermen have come here with a complaint," Hodger said after a pause.

"Complaint? What a day! All right, call them in."

Hodger went out and quickly reappeared in the company of two Nanais whom the engineers had seen on the river. The first, a lean old man, crossed the threshold and bowed low to Rogov.

"You're impossible, granpa! How many times have I told you not to make obeisances to me!" Rogov said in a nettled tone. "You always spoil my temper. Why don't you drop that habit—it's time you did!"

The second fisherman, with a tiny button of a nose lost amid a broad expanse of flat high-boned cheeks, was somewhat younger. He stepped up to Rogov and began excitedly:

"That's no good. We catch *kaluga* fish —we want to make a present to builders. Mechanic take it away—why? Oi, that's very bad!" The Nanai shook his head deprecatingly and smacked his lips.

"What fish? What are you talking about?"

Hodger hastened to explain. The fishermen had netted a gigantic *kaluga*, all of a half a ton, but they were unable to land it and asked a mechanic to help them. The mechanic rode up on a tractor, hitched up the tackle and jerked the huge fish out of the water. The mechanic's mates had then loaded the *kaluga* onto the sledge trailer and rode off with it. The fishermen were disgusted and insulted at the act, for they had intended giving half the fish to the section as a present and donating the other half to the defence fund.

"The damned scoundrel!" Rogov's jaw hardened. He glanced at Kotenev. "Hear that? It's a throwback to the old ruffianly attitude towards the Nanais. You are right, comrades," Rogov said to the fishermen. "We'll take measures immediately. The fish will be returned to you."

He gave orders for the mechanic to be found and brought to him. The old Nanai bowed again. Rogov turned away from him with a gesture of annoyance. Hodger left with the fishermen, but not before he had reminded the engineers that he was waiting for them at his house.

The lineworks' sectional superintendent, Pribytkov, a grey little old man in spectacles, laid the schedule for pipe hauling and welding before the engineers and the section chief. Attached to the schedule was a calculation of materials required.

"First of all about the pipes," Beridze said. "There are a lot of extra pipes at the section that Kovshov and I have passed. Does that mean that there's a shortage of pipes at some other place, or are they generally superfluous?"

Alexei got out his notes, and together they started making a count of the pipes

under the headings: pipes in stock, delivered to stacks, and strung out. When the balance was struck there proved to be an excess of over a hundred pipes.

"Alexander Ivanovich, have them shipped to Sections Six and Seven at once." Beridze said. "According to my information they're short of pipes there. You can ship practically all the extra pipes with the trucks that are leaving your section tomorrow."

Rogov walked up and down the room, noisily rubbing his rough chapped hands.

"It looks again as if I've been after someone else's stuff. But this time I know nothing about it!" He turned on Pribytkov. "Why didn't you say anything about it, comrade engineer, why didn't you tell me? Couldn't you count the pipes—have you forgotten your arithmetic?"

The engineers and the section chiefs hypercritically examined the work schedule, checking the rate of transportations by the day.

"D'you mean to say we'll be transporting pipes for another two months?" Rogov cried, bristling. "I don't agree, comrade superintendent. We'll tackle it quicker than that."

"We can't, Alexander Ivanovich," the old man demurred. "Look at the calculation. We have a dozen pipe carriers, each has a capacity. . . ."

"Trucks are trucks, but you're forgetting the men," Kotenev argued with Pribytkov. "You know perfectly well that our men are transporting more and more pipes every day on those very same trucks."

"I'm calling the drivers together today— we'll hear what they have to say," Rogov added.

"Whatever they say, they're making a bad job of it. They're still dropping the pipes all over the place," Pribytkov insisted gently but doggedly. "It's not provided for in the schedule and will require extra time."

"The section chief is right," Kovshov interposed. "Pipe transportation must be speeded up. When the drivers get together we'll discuss how to reorganize transport work. I have a good suggestion to make."

Rogov made a wry face. Kovshov's support did not seem to please him. Beridze noticed this, and confirmed:

"You'll see, Alexander Ivanovich, it's an excellent proposition, though very simple. I'm surprised it didn't occur to us before!"

Suddenly a strapping young man, carrying a driver's gauntlets, burst into the office. His head was covered with hoarfrost, and his wet sheepskin coat was frozen stiff. Panting heavily, he reported to Rogov:

"I've salvaged the truck! Placed it in the garage."

"Good lad!" Rogov brightened. "Run home and get warmed up. Tell them to give you a glass of vodka—say it's my order. And mind you don't get yourself on the sick list!"

The driver hesitated, his eyes on Rogov. The latter bundled him out.

"Now then, run along. I know the rules as well as you do—if you were fool enough to run your truck into a hole in the ice you get a reprimand, but now you've salvaged it—the reprimand's wiped out." Rogov leaned over to Kotenev in a swift whisper: "See how heavily a reprimand weighs on a man? This is not the time to be getting them. And especially from Batmanov."

A short man of immense breadth of shoulder wearing oil stained overalls appeared in the doorway.

"You talk to that pirate—I'm afraid I'll lose my temper," Rogov said to Kotenev.

"Who gave you the right to take the law into your own hands?" Kotenev demanded of the man in the overalls. "How dare you take the fish away from the Nanais?"

"We pulled the whopper out o' the river, didn't we? They'd never have been able to land it themselves anyhow," the mechanic said with an innocent shrug.

"That's enough!" Rogov exploded, unable to contain himself. "I'll have a special talk with you afterwards about the morality of it—I can't conveniently use all the expressions I'd like to just now."

"Your behaviour is foul, it smacks of the evil past," Kotenev said. "The Nanais deserve every respect. They help us in every way they can. Why did you treat them so shabbily? They wanted to make the works' section a gift of half the fish themselves."

"All the better then. Let 'em consider they've made us a present of it already," the mechanic said with a grin. "They can catch some more for themselves—there's plenty fish in the river."

"So you're a businessman besides!" Rogov said in mocking surprise. "Look here, you take that fish down to the kolkhoz chairman

right away, and then come back here—we'll have a little business chat together."

The words "business chat" were uttered in a tone that made the mechanic shiver.

"If you have no objection, I'll handle this matter," Kotenev proposed. "I'll go down to the garage and get all the men together—the Communists and non-Party men alike—and have a good talk with them. That mechanic and the trick he's played today deserve serious attention."

Pribytkov and Beridze were going through the stock lists of materials with Kovshov to ascertain what there was at the section and what it was short of.

"Make a note, Alexei—there's not enough carbide, also electrodes. Bitumen, none at all," Beridze rattled off.

Alexei, while he wrote, rubbed the melted grease over his cheeks with his left hand. Rogov sat apart with his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

It had already grown dark outside when Polishchuk came back. A crowd of drivers—healthy, ruddy-faced lads in sheepskin coats and *valenki*, trooped in after him. They crowded the office, spreading about them an acrid smell of benzine.

"Sit down, comrades drivers," Rogov said good-humouredly. He was now in a better frame of mind.

No speeches were made at this conference. All questions were quickly decided. Rogov held a slip of paper with Polishchuk's day report, and called out:

"Truck driver Solntsev! Three trips, nine pipes. Delivered six, dropped three at the nineteenth kilometre.... Fagged out towards the end, eh? What do I want those three pipes for at the nineteenth kilometre? You gave Smorchkov your pledge, but who's going to fulfil it?"

Solntsev got up and reported, his eyes averted.

"I tried my hardest, but I couldn't avoid landing in the ditch. I simply don't know what to do with these damned pipes! Maybe the trailer supports should be made lower, they'd be more reliable."

"Polishchuk, write down the suggestions," Rogov said quickly. "We'll see about the trailer, Solntsev, but your quota for tomorrow is twelve pipes—the usual nine plus today's three. I can't help it! And mind you don't chase your quota up to a hundred."

Solntsev grinned and looked round at his mates. They grinned too—they were apparently used to Rogov and liked him. The drivers got up and reported one by one. Rogov criticized them, took them to task, argued with them. Then came a graphic example of good work.

"Driver Makhov! Three trips, twelve pipes —all delivered. Come on, Makhov, tell these poor muffs how you do it. Four pipes at a time and not a single drop-off."

"It's a secret," Makhov said, with something like a warning glance in Kovshov's direction. "Let them think for themselves. I'm not going to do it for them."

"A secret?" Rogov laughed. "Private enterprise, eh, a rugged individualist? Here, let's have a look at you—we don't often meet such rare birds in this country. Just landed from America, eh?"

"That's not fair, Comrade Rogov. My hometown is Blagoveshchensk."

"So you're not going to share your secret?"

"No," Makhov answered coolly.

"Just as you like. We'll manage without it. I was only thinking you'll feel ashamed of it yourself afterwards."

"That's all right, you needn't worry about me! . . ."

Alexei intervened at this point and explained to the drivers the "inwards" delivery idea.

He was still speaking when the men broke out into a babble of excited talk. The idea took on at once.

"Comrade Rogov, let's introduce that method right away, beginning tomorrow," Solntsev shouted.

"Certainly," Rogov agreed. He looked closely at Alexei, and the latter caught approval in his glance. "We'll make a little amendment to your proposal, Comrade Kovshov. Something in the nature of a bonus at the terminal. The man who delivers his pipes to the spot gets a bonus."

"A glass of vodka!" someone shouted.

"Drunkard!" Rogov flashed back. "What do you say to a girl meeting you there with a mug of hot coffee and sandwiches and a pack of cigarettes—won't you like it?"

"Suits us down to the ground. We take you at your word!" said Makhov.

"Ah, that's you, Mister Individualist?" Rogov said, his eyes coming to rest on Makhov. "I quite forgot about you. Your secret's

done and dished now, eh? Nobody needs it now! Aren't you sorry?"

"No," Makhov answered sincerely.

Rogov gave orders to Polishchuk:

"From tomorrow we introduce pipe transportation by engineer Kovshov's method. Switch over without interrupting work. Get into all the arrangements and checking system with Pribytkov today."

"Right," said Polishchuk.

This man of few words had become Rogov's staunch assistant and friend ever since they had made each other's acquaintance on the stranded barge. Rogov might not have been able to save the barge, its crew and valuable cargo from disaster if Polishchuk had not come up on his tug boat in the very nick of time.

Polishchuk was disconcerted and upset at the moment. From the glances exchanged between the engineer and the truck driver he understood that they shared the secret between them. He was annoyed with himself for the blunder he had made. He wasn't sure whether he ought to tell Rogov about it or not. Just then he heard Kovshov saying:

"Comrade Rogov, you just called this 'inwards' method of transportation my method.

Honesty obliges me to rectify that." Alexei laughed, noticing that Makhov had ducked and was trying to hide himself from Rogov behind the backs of his mates.

"Wasn't it your suggestion?"

"Comrade Makhov thought of it and tried it out before I did."

"I see!" Rogov exclaimed in a tone of chagrin. "Makhov!" His eyes searched the room before they found him. "Don't hide yourself, I'll find you just the same. So you don't trust us—neither me, Polishchuk, nor Kotenev?"

The driver didn't answer. Rogov held him with his angry eyes.

"Leave him alone, Alexander Ivanovich, it's my fault," Polishchuk said quietly. "He came to me with the suggestion but I turned it down. It didn't appeal to me, I can't imagine why."

Rogov turned his eyes on him in surprise.

"What the devil's going on in my house?"

He wanted to give both Polishchuk and Makhov a wigging but noticed that the engineers and Kotenev were regarding him with amusement.

"All right, we'll talk about it some other time," he muttered.

Rogov dismissed the drivers with a parting admonition:

"I shall be away for a couple of days. I hope to find better work results when I come back."

"We'll have things running smoothly now," Solntsev said.

"You'll all have to hustle," Rogov went on. "The construction chief warned me that they're short of truck drivers at the distant sections. Some of you will soon have to move out there, on the tracks of Smorchkov."

"I'll be the first," Makhov whispered to Solntsev. "Otherwise it'll be hell for me here through that individualism of mine."

Beridze, Kovshov and Rogov left the office together. Early winter night had flung its dark cloak over the village. The uncertain glimmer of the stars barely penetrated the deep gloom.

"Wait a minute," said Rogov, and they all stopped.

An immense orange-coloured moon rose across the Adun. It hung over the river casting a weird light over everything—the dark

silent hills, the sloping bank draped in figured shadows, and the bluish ice of the Adun like glistening snow, stretching into the distance.

"Yes, it's good," Beridze admitted. "Fine landscape!"

"What's good in it!" Rogov said. "It's probably been like this a million years...."

"I thought you were inviting us to admire it?" Alexei observed.

"Not this. Wait, Georgi Davydovich," Rogov called to Beridze who was moving off. "Just a minute!"

And as if his words had switched on an invisible rheostat, lights flashed up momentarily—one string of lights along the bank, and another running down the ice track of the Adun. Bright and bold, they eclipsed the timid light of the moon and stars. Rogov turned his back on the river and looked down the construction line with a pleased expression. There, behind the houses and low hills, the section lights cast a lurid glow into the sky. It was as if some premature dawn were driving the night before it. Life too stirred with the coming of the lights. Trucks could be heard honking on the river, a tractor by the bank began to clatter, and circular saws

beyond the settlement struck up their piercing song. Some sleepy dogs responded half-heartedly with a peevish barking, but quickly lapsed into silence.

"Let's go. This was the addition to the landscape I wanted to show you," Rogov said.

Alexei fell behind Beridze and put his arm in Rogov's.

"I was given a message for you in Novinsk. Someone sends you warm regards."

"Who's that? Filimonov?"

"No, not Filimonov. You know who it is." Alexei felt Rogov's hard biceps grow taut under his fingers. "She says she often thinks of you. She'll be glad to see you."

"You're her confidant, I take it?" Rogov drew away brusquely. "I've heard something about that, I must say."

"Yes, her confidant," Alexei concurred, and the reason for Rogov's dark, hostile looks came to him in a sudden flash. He felt both amused and happy at heart. He squeezed Rogov's arm. "Don't growl at me so fiercely, Othello! I'm not wooing Olga Fyodorovna, I'm just a friend, if one can use that big word on such short acquaintance."

Rogov stopped and peered into Alexei's face.

"Thanks," he said softly, stealing a glance at Beridze who was walking on ahead. "I see I have nothing to conceal from you. I miss her awfully. And I'm grateful to her. She's inspired me with strength enough to move mountains. Sometimes I suffer the agonies of the damned—I miss her terribly. D'you know," he whispered into Alexei's ear, "she'll learn to love me yet, you'll see! I don't believe she's so strongly attached to that ... Konstantin."

"She doesn't love him. Painful though it is for her, she's tearing out of her heart all that she had in common with him," Alexei said in a tone of conviction.

"I'll go up to Novinsk. Just to take a look at her!" Rogov said in a voice that was passionate and bitter.

"Don't do that. Let her fight it out by herself."

"Then tell me about her!..."

The conversation broke off—they had reached the end of the Nanai camp, where a messenger from Hodger overtook them. The three of them discussed whether they should go to the chairman of the village Soviet now, or first hold a conference of the section's executive staff.

"We must get through everything today," Rogov said firmly. "I've got to be leaving tomorrow with the trucks, and you too must be getting a move on."

"You carry out your orders, we know our own business," Beridze said, nettled by his peremptory tone. "We'll stay on in Tyvlin for another day or two, perhaps more."

"Nothing doing, comrade chief engineer," Rogov retorted. "You've also got orders to strike camp tomorrow."

"Whose orders?"

"The chief's."

"By the way, what's the idea of bringing him up every minute of the day? You people talk about him all the time. You'd think he'd been here yesterday."

"So he was. Not yesterday, but the day before," Rogov said. "Like a bolt from the blue...."

"How did he manage to overtake us?"

"He came by plane. He was all over the section, talked to everybody, told them how to carry on, and flew away."

The engineers looked at one another.

"Then that phone call wasn't from Novinsk?"

"No, it was from Section Seven. That's why I didn't have a leg to stand on," sighed Rogov, and struck his forehead again with a hard rap.

"Did he leave any message for us?" Beridze asked.

"Yes, he said—'tell the engineers that I'm moving down the line ahead of them Don't let them poke about in holes that I'm going to calk myself. There are as many holes like that along the line as there are stars in the sky, and there's no need to stop by each one....'"

CHAPTER THREE

THE NANAIS ON THEIR OWN LAND

MAXIM HODGERS' roomy house was full of people. They sat on benches, at the table, along the walls and on the floor. The old men in their flowing padded robes, motionless and swarthy-complexioned, sat huddled in a corner puffing silently at their pipes. The young people occupied seats nearer to the door. Hodger and two other Nanais sat at the presiding table engaged in conversation. When the engineers came in amid an eddy of frosty vapour Hodger sprang up to meet them. Alexei surveyed the room and met the bright mocking eyes of Valya who sat sedately on a bench with three other girls. They broke into animated whispers and threw curious glances at him.

"Welcome, dear guests," Hodger said cordially. "I've been waiting and waiting. We

have been attending to some business in the meantime."

"Please go on with it, don't take any notice of us," Beridze said, pressing his hands to his breast. "We'll have a chat with the old men in the corner."

"Our business won't run away, but you'll be leaving soon," Hodger protested, drawing the guests into an adjoining room partitioned off from the first by a shaggy bearskin curtain.

The walls in this room were papered with newsprint and hung with mirrors and bunches of dried squirrel skins. A large nickel-plated bedstead with four shining knobs on the posts adorned the middle of the room. There was a writing desk with a typewriter on it. Behind a low screen embroidered with some red design two women squatted before a low table on which lay long needlework boxes made of birchbark. One of the women was swiftly turning the handle of a sewing machine; and the other plying a needle was putting the finishing touches to a fur mitten.

Skins were spread on the floor near the stove on which two little boys lay sprawled fast asleep Near-by, an old woman with a dry shrivelled face and a pipe between her teeth

was bathing an olive-skinned child in a deep iron tub. Several elderly Nanais were watching the proceedings with rapt interest Upon catching sight of the guests the old woman hastily took the child out of the water and wrapped it in a sheet which one of the Nanais was holding with an air of grave solemnity.

"They don't wash themselves too often yet, but they like to watch the children being washed," Hodger observed. "These are all my sons, and that's my wife," he added, pointing to the children and to a pretty little woman who came out from behind the screen. "Entertain the guests, Katya."

"Who are these for?" Beridze asked the hostess, examining the unfinished mitten she held in her hand.

"For you and your comrade," the woman said, her teeth flashing in a smile. "And we are making fur boots too for you, so that you should wear them and remember Tyvlin."

"She's a fine little woman," Hodger said with pride, gently placing his hand on his wife's shoulder. "She teaches the children and finds time to do a lot of other work. She's sewing warm things for the boys at the front—all the women in the camp are helping her."

They began to bustle about at the table, preparing to treat the guests. Bear's flesh, dry-cured venison, fish and berries appeared upon a white carefully ironed tablecloth. The *stroganina*—thinly sliced frozen fish—was a novelty to Alexei. The host carved the fish deftly and swiftly with a sharp knife and seasoned it with salt and pepper.

While the mistress went out for some other viands and Hodger absented himself in the other room, Rogov began talking with animation about the Nanais, expressing his sincere regard for them.

"They're honest and truthful—can't stand deceit. They repay kindness a hundredfold. A fine people."

While speaking Rogov drifted towards the table and absent-mindedly hooked with a fork the dried fillets of venison. He had not given a thought to food all day and was now apparently very hungry.

"They go out to work as if it were a festival. Whether it's fishing, or building the club, or putting up a new fanza for a neighbour, they do everything in cooperation. It does my heart good to look at them. And if there's anything I need doing at the works' section—clearing the road on the Adun, say, or any-

thing like that—they come out to the last man, kids and all I read somewhere—I think it was Lopatin—there was an explorer by that name —that the Nanais are a lazy people, unfit for work. What bunkum! On the contrary, they're terribly keen on work, and each of them has energy galore!"

Katya brought in a dish of large pickled cucumbers and placed it on the table, informing the guests with pride that they were from her own vegetable garden. Hodger came back and invited the guests to the table Hodger, Rogov and the engineers drank diluted alcohol out of little porcelain cups Rogov helped himself to a cucumber and said to Hodger:

"That cucumber and all the other vegetables are taken as a matter of course in the Nanai camps nowadays, but several years ago there wasn't a Nanai who would touch cucumbers, tomatoes or potatoes. Agriculture now gives you no less than fishing and hunting—isn't that so?"

The Nanai nodded.

"Vegetables and livestock yield a bigger return even than fish," he said.

"Not so long ago I myself witnessed rather curious incidents," Rogov went on. "The

Nanais, for instance, simply couldn't make out why a potato had to be dug into the earth. The Nanai would plant a potato and stand over the patch for hours waiting to see what would happen. After a while his patience would give out and he would dig the potato out again and convince himself that it was all a sell—the potato was the same as it was before!"

Rogov laughed good-naturedly at the memory. Hodger, who was following his speech with interest, added with a faint smile:

"It was still harder getting used to the cows. . . ."

"No one knew or wanted to know how to milk a cow," Rogov broke in. "The schoolteacher and the doctor were obliged to perform that duty, and at milking time the whole camp would stand around them in a crowd and roar with laughter. They couldn't find any cowherds for quite a time—the old men wouldn't have anything to do with it. 'What,' look after beasts? Whoever heard of such a thing! Turn them out into the taiga and let them forage for themselves. . . .' They couldn't understand why a cow ate hay—'dry grass'—instead of fish. One of them would go up and shove a dried fish

under the cow's nose and be surprised that she turned her head away in disgust. But that's all a thing of the past.... They're living the new way now."

"We've become our own masters," Hodger said with feeling. "Our people had almost died out. After epidemics the settlements were all deserted. Everything ran wild, and the people themselves looked like creatures of the forest.... The shamans and the tradesmen oppressed them. The learned men predicted that the Nanai would be extinct by the forties. At the end of the last century there were five thousand Nanais, and by nineteen fifteen there were already less than four thousand. Only after the Revolution did the people begin to pick up. The population is well over five thousand now. We know no epidemics or want. We have our own written language. The young folks are able to read and write, and some of the people of this village are receiving a college education...."

Katya Hodger hospitably plied the guests with food and drink, but they thanked her and got up. Thereupon the host, too, rose.

"We still have a good deal of evil left over from the old days," he said and shook his head. "The shamans still exist. I was just

dealing with one of them while I was waiting for you. I can show you a real live shaman if you like...."

They returned to the big room, where the company was engaged in loud conversation. They sat in groups, shouting and laughing. Valya, supported by her girl friends, was singing lustily in Nanai to the tune of *Beloved City*. Maxim conducted the engineers to a seat in a well-lit corner, under a big oil lamp. His face grew grave and he said something briefly in Nanai in a quiet tone. This produced instant silence.

A fat elderly Nanai in a peaked raccoon hat and a greasy blue padded robe stepped out of the back rows into the middle of the room. Two scars showed darkly on his forehead and shiny cheek. Hodger stared at him fixedly and spoke to him with ill-concealed hostility.

"I want to join team," the Nanai answered in Russian, stealing a glance towards the engineers. He evidently took them to be important officials from town and counted on their support. "I want to work honest like all men. Write me down in team, I want to catch fish."

"Stop playing the fool," Hodger sharply interrupted. "Why are you suddenly in such

a hurry to join the team? You should have thought of honest work before. Everyone here knows what you were up to before!..."

Rogov leaned over to the engineers and explained in a whisper what it was all about. This was the shaman Hodger had mentioned. He had lain low for a time, but resumed his evil practices when the war broke out. He saw his chance to profit by a crafty, outrageous device. Many of the Nanai boys of the village had gone to the army. They wrote letters home from the front, and the shaman made his "prophecies" by these letters. His clients were mostly old women anxious about the fate of their sons, and he fleeced and fooled them to the top of his bent. So far he had got away with it, but recently he had been improvident enough to prophesy to old Mergen that her son would come home safe and sound, instead of which she received notification that her son was badly wounded. Indignant at being made a fool of, Mergen complained to the village Soviet about it.

At the same time another affair was suddenly brought to light. The young wife of the hunter Foma died of premature deliv-

ery. Foma was considered one of the best hunters in the village and had contributed many sable skins to the defence fund. Deep down in his heart, however, he was still superstitious. He was deeply attached to his wife, and when she died he buried her secretly from the neighbours according to the old custom, that is, with all her belongings, so that she be provided with everything she needed in the other world. A week later Foma discovered that the grave had been dug up and all the things were missing He learned moreover that his old mother had been twice to the shaman with his pregnant wife, and he now suspected that the shaman was to blame for her death.

Foma had been summoned by Hodger and now stood before him. Rogov took the list of missing articles from Foma and showed it to the engineers. It contained two fur coats, ten robes, twenty thousand rubles in notes, two sable skins and numerous household chattels.

"Can you not divine where these things are, O shaman?" Hodger said ironically. "You know everything, you see everything."

The shaman stood silent, his head lowered. Foma eyed him with disgust.

"Well, if you have forgotten your witchcraft we shall have to try the militia," Hodger said mockingly. "The militia are pretty good at unravelling things, they'll find them quickly! . . ."

The shaman started and began muttering, mixing Russian words with Nanai. He never saw the things and knew nothing about them. Foma was a crafty man—he had invented the whole story. It were better the chairman enrolled him in the team as soon as possible.

Foma, in a fit of rage, rushed up to the shaman and raised his fist over him. The latter cowered and suddenly whimpered—a thin squeak, like a terrified rat. A burst of laughter rose all round, and someone shied a rag rolled up in a ball at the shaman. A hubbub broke loose in the room.

Alexei watched the proceedings with keen interest. Rogov, who was sitting beside him turned and gave him a piercing look.

"You haven't told me everything. When Tanya passed through here she said Olga had received news of Konstantin's death. Why didn't you tell me about it? I must know everything!"

"I didn't want to get you all worked up. You are liable to dash straight off to Olga, and that would be foolish. I tell you again, you should leave her alone for a time. After all, it isn't as if you could help her."

Under cover of the hubbub in the room Alexei told Rogov about Khmara's visit to Rodionova. Rogov's face darkened.

"To think of all those scoundrels making her wretched! Too bad I wasn't there, I'd have something to say to him!" He fidgeted nervously on his seat. "I can imagine how hard it must be for her all alone." Rogov pressed Kovshov's hand so hard that he winced. "That man may show up again, just to gloat over her misery! The devil knows what that kind are capable of! And she's all alone, with nobody to protect her."

"Don't you worry. Olga can take care of herself," Alexei said soothingly, but his words did not calm Rogov's fears.

"Of course I know she would drive me away if I were to go to her," he whispered in Alexei's ear. "On the other hand, if anything happens to her I shall never forgive myself. It's maddening to know that someone you love is in need of your pro-

tection and just because you have no right to interfere you have to stand aside and wait!"

A minute later he got up.

"I'm going to try to have a talk with her over the phone. I'll have a look and see how Polishchuk is getting along with the cars at the same time." His mouth twisted in a wry smile. "Rogov, the pirate of the ice highway!"

Kovshov watched him, strong and outwardly imperturbable, picking his way to the exit through the people squatting on the floor. Rogov's uneasiness was communicated to Alexei, it awakened the anxiety for his wife that lived constantly within him. His imagination painted a dim picture of the war. Flames and spouting earth leapt up before his mind's eye.... He saw a forest... snow... dark figures in sheepskin jackets crouching before a bonfire.... He tried to picture Zina among them but could not. He always thought of her amid familiar surroundings, at home, on a Moscow street or at the institute.

He passed a hand over his fevered brow, opened his eyes and met Valya's gazing at him with deep sympathy. She had been watching him all the time.

When the discomfited shaman was led out and the noise in the room subsided, two lads, at a sign from Hodger, led old Mafa up to Beridze. The old man could hardly stand on his crooked trembling legs. A hundred and ten years of life had so shrivelled him that his face resembled a baked apple and there was not a single hair left upon his head. The engineers made room for him on the bench between them. Hodger placed another bench facing them, and four other old men lowered themselves upon it with an air of dignity and began puffing at their pipes. The rest of the company crowded round.

"How d'you do, Mafa!" Beridze said in a loud voice. "Do you recognize me?"

The old man's small bleary eyes stared vacantly at Beridze. It was suddenly borne in upon Alexei with a shock that this man had begun life in the days of Pushkin, that he had seen Muravyov and Nevelskoy and had spoken to them. How much of life's wisdom, how many the impressions he had

absorbed in over a century of life, yet physical decay had rendered him senile and decrepit. As if in answer to this thought, Volodya, Hodger's nephew, standing behind the old man, said with chagrin:

"He can't even talk properly. He's grown quite foolish, the old man."

But Mafa, who was staring fixedly at Beridze all the time, suddenly gave utterance in a quavery singsong murmur, and touched the engineer's beard with a gnarled trembling hand. Volodya burst out laughing, and was joined by the other boys.

"Be quiet, Volodya, or I'll send you out!" Hodger growled, trying to catch what the old man was saying. "Mafa says that he had a friend in his youth among the first *Lo-cha*—the Russians on the Adun—with a black beard like that. His name was Fyodor—he was a very strong and brave man. The Chinese were carrying on trade here at the time. Once they beat up Mafa for not paying his debts. Fyodor took his part and gave two of the Chinamen a good hiding."

The old man wept at the revival of these memories, and his voice now rose, now trailed off to a whisper.



"Fyodor with the black beard was killed by a bear," Hodger translated. "They were hunting together—afterwards Mafa killed the beast. He says he was a young man at the time, but it was so many years ago that he couldn't say how many."

The old man fell silent, gasping for breath. Then he began mumbling.

"I guess he's now trying to remember whether Muravyov had a beard or not," Volodya struck in again with a laugh, and yelled saucily into the old man's ear: "Give the beard a rest, granpa!"

Mafa lapsed compliantly into silence. Beridze turned to the other old men. He was interested in the flood tides on the Adun. He asked them to try to remember the highest levels the river had reached in previous years. Mafa sat listening to Beridze in silence, then he asked Hodger in Nanai:

"Who is that *Lo-cha*?"

"He's our friend," Hodger replied.

He told the old man in simple words about Beridze, the construction and the road which would now connect the village with the big town. The old man stirred excitedly, glanced for some reason at the lamp hanging over the table and suddenly began

singing in a cracked tremulous voice. His body swayed to and fro to the rhythm of the song.

"He is telling a story for you about the wooden man who built the road to the heavens," explained Hodger. "There was no room for the Nanais on earth, so the wooden man decided to move their abode to the skies."

There was silence in the room as everyone sat listening to the old man's chant. Maxim translated the tale to the engineers. The old man suddenly broke off in the middle of a word. He shut his eyes and dropped off into a doze. Volodya unceremoniously shook him out of his sleep.

"You mustn't sleep, d'you hear? They want to speak to you!"

Volodya listened to what Beridze said, then asked the old man questions in a loud, strong girlish voice, alternately in Russian and Nanai. Mafa stared again at Beridze and sat brooding, his dry bloodless lips stirring silently.

"You try to remember, granpa," Volodya urged him. "The black-bearded engineer asks whether the Adun has ever risen to the level of our village. It's very important for him to

know it. He's worried that the water shouldn't flood the road and the pipe line during the flood season. Don't you understand? What's the matter with you, isn't it plain enough?" Volodya flung his hands up in a gesture of annoyance.

"Don't get excited, take it easy. The man's six times your age," Maxim Hodger rebuked him. The chairman apologetically explained to the engineers: "The old man listens to Volodya more readily and understands him better than anyone else."

Volodya resumed the conversation in Nanai in calm tones. The old man answered him something. A gleam of consciousness stirred in the depths of his sunken eyes.

"Mafa has remembered," the lad said with a pleased look, turning to Beridze. "Only once did the Adun flood water come up close to the fanzas—about seventy years ago. The old man says: the Nanais then incurred the wrath of the river god and he wanted to punish them."

"Has he ever known the river to come up, say, to that spot where the two little sheds on piles are standing?"

Several voices answered at once and Hodger held up his hand to command silence.

"Mafa's not the only one who can answer you that," he said. "The Adun reached that spot in 1930 I believe. No, it was 1931.... I was on my way to Leningrad at the time, to study, and sailed as far as Rubezhansk on a light boat on the flood tide."

Beridze turned to Alexei.

"You see, Alexei, we were not mistaken. Our line here runs beyond the village. So we have nothing to fear in the way of floods on this section."

Beridze, however, was not content with this.

"Try and find out, laddie, whether Mafa ever remembers the left bank in the vicinity of Choma and Chilmi being swamped in such cases?" he asked Volodya. "Sections Seven and Eight of the line run through there."

Volodya tackled the old man again.

"Don't sleep, rack your brains!" he shouted, trying doggedly and patiently to drag the necessary information for the engineers out of the 110-year-old man.

Utterly spent, Mafa was led home, and Beridze turned his attention to the other old men. He put questions and meticulously wrote down the replies.

The young people began to be bored by the proceedings. The boys and girls drew apart to a corner of the room, and sounds of suppressed mirth could be heard coming from their group of which Volodya was the centre. Alexei looked over their heads and saw the Nanai student treating his companions to a performance of the operetta *Sylva* which he had seen in Rubezhansk Volodya possessed an agreeable tenor and an inborn gift of mimicry. Kovshov was thoroughly enjoying this one-man show, no less so than the other spectators, when he was recalled by Beridze The chief engineer had now finished with the old men.

"Very valuable information, very valuable indeed," he repeated in a tone of satisfaction.

The engineers got up to go. Maxim Hodger detained them.

"There's a very important matter," he said. "I don't know what you'll think of it, but I wanted to ask your advice.... The whole village has adopted a resolution at a meeting today. . ."

Alexei took the sheet of paper which Hodger held out and read it:

"'To all the kolkhozniks of the Russian villages and Nanai camps on the Adun.'"

Alexei ran his eyes down the page and read the paper to himself in silence. When he had finished he handed it to Beridze, visibly moved.

"Oil is needed for carrying on the war, therefore the Party and the Government demand that the pipe line should be started as quickly as possible. This construction will give a big impetus to the further development of all the villages on the Adun.

"We, the inhabitants of Tyvlin camp, consider the construction to be an object of our deepest concern and we all undertake to help the builders in every way we can. We propose to you that the construction should be proclaimed a people's undertaking in order that the whole population of the Adun share with the builders the responsibility before the state for its completion on schedule."

"It's poorly written—I feel that myself," Hodger said apologetically. "Will you correct it please, Comrade Beridze."

"You've written it fine, Maxim, it couldn't be better!" the chief engineer exclaimed and put his arm round Hodger. "To correct anything in that paper would only mean to spoil it. . . ."

"Volodya!" Hodger cried, overjoyed. "Get the typewriter—you're going to type this out. But be careful."

The typewriter here was evidently an object of considerable pride. Amid a general hush Volodya carried it out gingerly on outstretched hands, placed it on the table, sat down before it with a solemn air and slipped a sheet of paper in. The Nanais crowded round the lad in a close circle, and he began typing out the message with one finger under Maxim's dictation.

CHAPTER FOUR

AT TANYA VASILCHENKO'S

BERIDZE'S and Kovshov's journey was drawing to a close. They were not far from Olgokhta where the works' line and the river branched off in different directions. That day the engineers were making particularly good speed and in the first few morning hours they travelled a long way from the place where they had spent the night.

At Alexei's request Beridze reluctantly agreed to make a halt. They spread a ground sheet on the snow and had their lunch without lighting a fire. Beridze soon got up impatiently, scanned the locality, then drew out his topographical map and started making corrections in it. Alexei packed up and stepped over to him.

The high bank on which they stood commanded a view of a boundless snowy plain

bathed in sunshine. Below them lay the immobile ice-bound river with silvery patches of snow on its mirrorlike surface. In the distance loomed the rolling low hills rising in terraces. Amid this white snowy waste they looked as though painted on canvas, those in the foreground being faintly lilac-tinted, deepening behind to a rich violet, with dark blue in the background. Dark-grey clouds clustered in the clear sky over the hills.

Alexei was reminded of another construction line, ten thousand kilometres away from here, which he and Beridze had stood thus scanning about three years ago. Everything had been different, though—torrid heat and green vegetation. His friendship with Beridze had strengthened since then, and now he, Alexei Kovshov, once a pupil, a shy graduate of the technical institute, had become first assistant to the chief engineer of a great construction project.

"What immense spaces and what freshness of colour!" Beridze cried with delight. "Really, there's nothing like it anywhere—that's why the work here is of such a sweeping scope. Where, even in our country, would young engineers like you and me find a job on such a huge scale as this? That's the Far

East for you, Alexei my boy—a Stalin construction job!"

"You don't have to boost it to me, comrade. I've been a Far-Eastern patriot for a long time," Alexei retorted, gazing with pleasure at the animated face of the chief engineer. His beard, moustache and eyebrows were grey with hoarfrost. Alexei understood that Beridze was not so much thrilled by the beauty of the morning and the open spaces as he was at the prospect of at last seeing Tanya that day.

"I know it, Alexei, I feel it myself: these vast expanses make a man—if he's not a rag—strong, enterprising and daring. A weak man had better keep away from here. No wonder it was only the strongest and the most daring who used to venture out to the Adun in the past."

Alexei did not wait for his friend to finish. He suddenly crouched low on his skis and with a sweep of his arms went plunging down the steep bank. He glided out onto the ice of the Adun in a series of broad zigzags. Beridze watched him, then glided down after him.

They crossed the river over the slippery ice, trying to keep their skis from skidding

with the aid of their staffs which merely scratched the surface of the ice. The tapping of the skis and the occasional muffled groan of the ice crust bursting with the frost could be heard distinctly amid the dead silence.

"Get out onto the bank, Alexei, it's hard going here!" Beridze cried, exhaling a big white cloud and brushing the rime from his moustache and beard with his ungloved hand

Alexei obediently turned his skis. The engineers climbed the sloping sparsely wooded left bank. Tall larches alternated with squat firs. The snow lay heavily on the drooping branches.

A deep throbbing noise and measured clatter on the river behind them broke the stillness. The engineers turned round and saw six trucks travelling at a good speed in single file. Each truck hauled a trailer heavily loaded with pipes.

"Our boys!" Beridze cried, following the vehicles with his eyes. "Make haste, my lads, don't waste time! Say what you like, Alexei, but the line's on the left bank already. It's alive and it's gathering strength every hour. D'you remember that cluster of lights at Rogov's section? Soon they'll illuminate the whole Adun and switch over to the island.... Don't you sneer, you sceptic!" he shouted as Alexei

smiled ironically and peered with mock scrutiny at the deserted banks "After all, the important thing at present is to make sure that our decisions are correct."

"Of that I have no doubt."

They proceeded on their way, stopping now and then to examine the relief of the bank and verify the topographical survey data An hour and a half later they met the six trucks coming back empty. The drivers, on catching sight of them, stopped and climbed out of their cabs without switching off the motors. Beridze did not miss the opportunity to find out how many trucks were engaged on pipe transportation and how many trips they managed to do in one day.

A little farther down the river the engineers turned off onto a byroad branching away from the river and smoothed flat by trucks. These byroads were called "whisker-tracks." They were indeed like gigantic whiskers running out in all directions from the main ice road. The skiers took this road and soon came to a stack of pipes, bales and cases covered with tarpaulin, a little hut knocked together out of boards and a number of other unfinished houses and sheds. No less than a hundred men were working here on

the buildings and laying out the recently shipped pipes.

This was one of the bases that had been established at every twenty kilometres along the construction line for the distribution of materials and food supplies. This one belonged to Section Nine. Its Chief, Shmelev, a calm elderly man unhurried in his movements, met the engineers at the stacks.

"Glad to see you. I've been expecting you," he said, shaking hands, and conducted them to the little house made of boards.

"Expecting us? How's that?" Alexei asked.

"Tanya Vasilchenko told me about you She rigged up the line, here yesterday and I'm now in touch with the section. There it is." Shmelev pointed to a wire suspended on the trees.

Inside the hut a fire was blazing in a little iron stove. The engineers took off their caps and mittens and slipped off their knapsacks. Shmelev treated them to fried fish spread on a sheet of iron, stale bread, and tea in big tin cups. They discussed the latest war communiqués. Their information was three days old. Alexei felt his heart contracting again in alarm as he listened to Shmelev's speculations concerning possible changes at the front. Be-

fore setting out on his journey he had received a letter from Moscow. Neither the radio nor the newspapers could give him such living details as were contained in this letter. It had been almost a month in the mails, and twelve more days had passed on this trail down the Adun with Beridze. During that time the situation at the approaches to Moscow had not improved—that at least he knew. He wondered what had happened these last three days.

"This place of mine has become something like a hotel," Shmelev said in the tone of a hospitable host. "The traffic on the line is quite heavy, and I get quite a few visitors. I'm not talking about the people who shuttle back and forth between the sections—they just drop in to warm themselves up and don't stay long. I've been having visitors even from Novinsk."

"Who, for instance?"

"Smorchkov, the truck driver. D'you know him? There's a tough lad for you! The road here drifts over all the time, and he got stuck with his truck some seven kilometres from here. One night he staggered in all played out and in a pretty bad temper. 'Lend me a hand,' he said. 'I'll do you a good turn some

day.' Had to help the fellow, of course. We dragged the truck out and refuelled it. The man was dog-tired. I gave him something to eat and he fell asleep over my table with a chunk of bread in his hand. He didn't even wake when I laid him down to sleep on the bunk. But he jumped up in about three hours and hurried off...."

"Let us hope he's already reached the strait," Alexei said.

"I doubt it. He's passed Section Nine—I got that from our Section Chief, Pankov. The road gets steadily worse after the ninth, and they say there's no road at all between Adun and the strait. I doubt whether he'll make it with the truck, though he's got plenty of grit. It's an enormous job the fellow's taken upon himself!"

"Anyway, he's doing a good service," Beridze remarked. "At all the sections we visited the drivers refer to him in their Socialist pledges..."

"Who d'you think came down on me from Novinsk after Smorchkov left?—three hundred guests at one shot," Shmelev said.

"Goncharuk's column?"

"Yes. It's easier for them making the trail all together. When the road gets snowed up

they climb out of their trucks and clear it themselves. They're pretty tired out too. Sometimes they have to shovel their way through several kilometres of snowdrifts. I daresay it's a bit worse than making it on foot. Goncharuk himself is ill, he can hardly stand on his feet. He says if the road gets worse farther along, he'll leave the trucks at Section Ten and strike out for the strait on foot. What else can you do? Drag those trucks out on your back? He was here only for a day, but I had my hands pretty full, I can tell you. Three hundred men! They all had to be put up somewhere and fed! But they were a good help to me too—they worked like Stakhanovites. Afterwards Silin, the tractor driver, rolled up with a regular house on sledge runners. He was a great help too—he smoothed down the road and helped bring up the freights."

"When did Silin pass?"

"Let me see.... The day before yesterday! Right after he left, the chief turned up."

Again the engineers heard the words, uttered weightily and significantly. Beridze, feigning ignorance, asked:

"What chief?"

"Why, the construction chief. We've got no other chief on the Adun!"

Shmelev pulled his cap off, revealing a completely bald head, poured himself out a cup of boiling water and related between sips how Batmanov suddenly descended on them, made a general inspection, spoke to the men and gave both him, Shmelev, and Tanya Vasilchenko a dressing down. The memory of it visibly tickled Shmelev.

"What did Tanya Vasilchenko get it for?" Beridze asked.

"The stores weren't ready in time," Shmelev went on, missing the point of the question. "'Do you intend messing about with those wretched sheds for a year?' he said. 'We'll build the whole pipe line in a year!... What'll you do if all the pipes and stuff get snowed under—dig 'em out?' An amazing man—he noticed everything, criticized everything! Chivied me over those pipe stacks as well, said they were too high. 'Why must you pile them up to the sky? Haven't you got enough room? You're only making more work for yourself. We'll soon start running them out in a line—that's when those skyscrapers of yours will give you a devil of a time!...'"

Alexei laughed—Shmelev had even succeeded in conveying Batmanov's intonation.

"But why did the chief have it in for Tanya Vasilchenko?" Beridze asked again.

"She got it for the wiring, of course. Not running it up fast enough, he said. He came here with her. He wanted to speak to the head office and hold a dispatcher conference from here. But I had no phone connection with my section yet, so there was nothing doing. He reminded Tanya Vasilchenko how many kilometres of wire she had promised to run up daily. Calculated how much she had fallen short. 'You've let me down, and the state too,' he says."

"What did she say?" Alexei asked.

"She didn't say anything. I guess she was hurt. She's a proud girl. I knew her father, Pyotr Vasilchenko. . . ."

"Did you, when was that?" Beridze asked with interest. He was eager for everything that concerned Tanya.

"I was a partisan in his detachment in the Civil War. He was a dashing commander and a splendid fellow. Tatyana's the spit image of him in looks and character." The old partisan spoke about Pyotr Vasilchenko with a sort of solemn pride. "Pankov came down together with the chief. He's another old acquaintance of mine. He was a great friend of

Tanya's father. That night while Batmanov slept, Pankov and I sat up chatting, remembering the old Volochayevsk days. Pankov is one of the old guards, a strong dependable man—they always put him in charge of the most difficult jobs, and he generally comes out on top. He has a great respect for Tatyana, Pankov has. She got into hot water at the head office when the old chiefs were in charge, because of her straightforward character. Pankov stood up for her and she worked on his section all through the troublous times. . . ."

"Did Pankov meet the chief here?"

"The chief called him out to Novinsk, so he went. They met somewhere half-way, near Section Seven. Batmanov turned him back. 'Show me your assistant,' he said, 'and hand over your affairs to him. I'm sending you to the strait as my deputy. Put things in order there and then I'll come down and give you a hand.' They seem to get along very well together."

"I believe Pankov's kid is in one of Tatyana's wiring teams," Alexei said. "A bright lad, Genka."

"Yes, that's his son all right. Pankov met him here. They were drinking tea with me,

the three of them—the chief, Pankov and Genka. Batmanov explained to Pankov: 'I let him go with Tatyana at my own risk. He's such a persistent little fellow, doesn't want to lag behind his comrades.' Pankov answered: 'That's all right, let him get used to difficulties, he'll make a good member of the collective.' Excuse me a moment...."

Through the window Shmelev caught sight of some trucks and hastened out to meet them.

"Come along, old man, enough dawdling here," Beridze said to Alexei. "I'll finish this pipe and then we'll be off."

Alexei understood him—Beridze was impatient to see Tatyana. She wasn't far from here—only a few kilometres away.

Shmelev came back. He looked at the engineers, flushed with the heat of the room, and said pointedly:

"The chief told me to tell you that he had been here...."

Kovshov pictured Batmanov sitting in this tiny room and issuing orders.

"What did the chief tell you?" Alexei asked.

"Well, that you shouldn't waste time. 'They're greedy for everything,' he said, 'and

are sure to have a finger in every pie. But they've got more important business on hand than your base. So you shoo them off. But do it politely, because they're big pots too and can shoo you off instead.'"

Alexei and Beridze exchanged glances and got up in silence. Shmelev jumped up, taken aback.

"Comrade chief engineer, you didn't understand me! I was only quoting the chief."

"Oh no, since those were your orders it's your duty to kick us out!" Beridze protested with mock gravity.

"I shouldn't advise you to go just now—a blizzard is brewing," Shmelev urged them. "I've lived on the Adun long enough to know when the weather is going to change."

"We're going," Beridze announced with decision. "The weather is clear, and don't you try to becloud it, old man."

They set out from the supply base through a deep depression resembling a forest lane that ran as a sort of dividing line between two dissimilar forests—on one side there grew immense straight-trunked larches and ash trees, and on the other side, trees of various species and heights. The sun's rays struggled dimly through their dense snow-

covered thickets. The sky stretched over the depression in a cheerful blue ribbon. The two skiers seemed to be the only living creatures in the snow-bound taiga.

The engineers moved along in silence, both thinking of Batmanov. When they had taken leave of him at the head office he had given them no hint of his intention of going out on the line. He had merely jocularly threatened to catch up with them and spur them on from behind. Now he proved to have got in ahead of them, and the people at the works' sections were full of him—what he had said, whom he had praised, whom he had taken to task, what orders he had issued, what and whom he had promised. And though there was much that was still vague and undecided along the line, and while life at the different sections was not running smoothly yet, he left behind him in men's hearts a calm confidence in their own powers and in the powers of their chief.

"It doesn't sound so bad—the Chief of the Adun'—does it?" said Beridze.

"Sounds good. The people on the line have got to know Batmanov now—I'm glad of that," Alexei answered. A cloud of frost grew out of his lips at each word. "And I remember

being afraid that he was the swivel-chair type of worker."

"There's a time for everything, Alexei, my boy. Time for the swivel-chair and time for the construction line. You haven't seen him on the line yet, you wait!"

They hurried along at a good pace, every now and then resuming the conversation. The forest greeted them cheerfully, dropping feathery snowflakes on their heads. The trunks and boughs, in the grip of the frost, made loud snapping noises. A sudden encounter at a bend in the road showed Beridze and Alexei that they were not alone in this silent taiga. A roe buck suddenly sprang out into the depression from behind a fir tree. Startled by the presence of human beings it leapt gracefully into the air with an enormous bound. Beridze's hand flew to his holster, but the roe buck disappeared before he could draw. Some small creature of a species unknown to them scampered across their path and plunged into the thickets pursued by Alexei's whistle, leaving tiny tracks in the snow.

"Singleness of purpose is a great thing for a man to have," Alexei said.

"Whom d'you mean?" Beridze asked.

"Batmanov. He's found thousands of men and hundreds of matters to deal with on the line, yet he hasn't forgotten about us. I can almost hear him at every step: 'I'm watching you fellows, now then, don't dawdle! Hurry up, we're waiting for those construction plans!' You must admit we'd still be hanging around Rogov somewhere if it wasn't for him being ahead of us at the sections!..."

The wires stretched from tree to tree like fine strands of web glittering in the sunshine. These wires and the gleaming white insulators on the trees were a thrilling sight here in this wild taiga. Beridze's frosted whiskers spread in a smile every time he looked up.

"Good girl, Tanya, smart girl!" the chief engineer kept repeating with admiration. "Look at the delicate embroidery she's left behind her in the taiga! I bet you messages are already flashing across those wires. Shouldn't be surprised if that same Shmelev is hurrying to pass on some gossip to her about us."

"Hist!" Alexei said, holding up his hand.

They stood listening. Amid the tense silence of the forest the wires could be heard hum-

ming—a disquieting eerie sound, faint and plaintive.

"Sounds like someone complaining. Perhaps it's some cheerless report or bad news being transmitted."

"You give me the creeps with your mystical effusions. Wires are wires—just a piece of metal," Beridze said humourously, but he too grew thoughtful.

The traces of campfires and patches of tramped down snow where Tanya Vasilchenko's team had recently been working grew more and more frequent. Presently the linemen's transportable supply base came into view—four tents on rigid frameworks. In one of them a boy and a girl with dark frostbitten cheeks were busy round an iron stove, cooking something in canteens and carrying on a desultory conversation. Light camp beds stood in the tents, with coils of wire, hooks and insulators lying between them and under them. . .

Having enquired about Tanya's whereabouts, the engineers moved on without delay. Before long human voices sounding strangely in the taiga reached them and soon they spotted the brigade that was hoisting the wire up to the trees. Beridze and Alexei stood

watching the linemen unnoticed from a slight distance. Some of them hoisted the wire, strung out for hundreds of metres along the ground, onto the end of long poles, and others, perched in the trees, where a previous team had fixed up the brackets and insulators, stretched and hung the wires.

At first Alexei did not recognize Chernov, the young technician from Filimonov's department, who was in charge of the operations. The lad was startled by the sudden appearance of the engineers. He hurriedly answered their questions keeping a close eye on the wire suspension. Chernov broke off what he was saying to ask:

"Have you heard any fresh communiqués? We've been hearing the same one on our line for the last three days."

But before the newcomers could answer, he dashed off with a swift apology to the end of the line where two of the boys were in trouble. The wire flew off and came down with a swishing noise onto the snow. Alexei wanted to wait for him, but Beridze was in a hurry and drew his comrade on.

The second team was fixing insulator brackets on the trees. One of the Komsomol

members caught sight of the engineers and sang out at the top of his voice:

"Look, there they are!"

It was obvious that Beridze and Kovshov were expected. The team downed tools in an instant and flocked in a noisy crowd round the guests who had sat down on a felled tree. Questions were fired at them from all sides as to the situation on the fronts, about the news in town and at the head office and about friends and acquaintances.

Alexei caught sight of Genka Pankov. The padded trousers and jacket drawn about his middle with a belt added bulk to the boy's figure and made him look even shorter than he was. His nose was swollen—evidently a touch of frostbite. Genka carried himself with an air of independence, and when Alexei called him he sauntered over with studied nonchalance.

"Well, Genka, have you got used to life in the taiga?" the engineer asked, drawing the lad towards him.

"Why shouldn't I?" Genka answered in a somewhat guarded manner.

"He's doing fine, he's a real Stakhanovite—beats everybody at knocking up brack-

cts. He climbs trees like a squirrel," one of the girls said in young Pankov's praise. Alexei recognized the speaker. It was Zina, Zalkind's former secretary.

"They say Utesov and his orchestra have arrived in Novinsk. Is that true?" her friend, a thin girl in a clumsy padded pea-jacket, asked eagerly.

"Did you see your father?" Alexei asked Genka, without releasing him.

"I did. Why?"

"I suppose he wanted to take you with him?"

"How could he when I'm at work," said Gena with dignity. "He's been appointed at the strait, and we're heading in that direction anyway. . . ."

"Your nose is frostbitten, I see. . . . You should be more careful."

"Mine's nothing! You should see the others! Even Kolya Smirnov is going about with dark blobs on his cheeks."

"Kolya? Where is he?" Beridze said, looking around.

"Here he comes!"

Long-legged Kolya Smirnov came dashing towards them on skis, dodging skilfully among the trees.

"We came across a bear's den yesterday, I saw it first," Genka boasted excitedly. "We woke him up, prodded him with long poles, and he crawled out of his hole."

"He was a dreadful sight! All bedraggled, with bloodshot eyes," Zina flung in with a little shiver.

"You didn't even see him, it was me who told you," Genka said, eyeing her with scorn.

"And what did he do?" Alexei asked.

"Kolya Smirnov finished him off with two shots."

"Look out!" Kolya shouted, dashing up.

He elbowed his way unceremoniously through the crowd of boys and girls. Here too he was lightly clad in sports clothes, not altogether suitable for life in the taiga. His face with the dark patches on his cheeks shone with grease.

"Tatyana thought you had by-passed us down the river," he said, shaking hands with the engineers.

With Kolya there the conversation grew still livelier. No one noticed how the time flew. Genka began to feel chilly and started to dance to keep himself warm. Beridze kept looking round.

"How is Tatyana getting on with the job? Do the youngsters obey her?" Beridze asked Kolya in a low tone.

"I should say they do! She could make anyone obey her! Would you like me to prove it?" Kolya leaned over to Genka and whispered: "Tatyana's coming!"

"Tatyana!" Genka ejaculated so loudly and suddenly that Beridze started.

The crowd scattered in an instant, floundering in the snow with their heavy *valenki*. The engineers burst out laughing.

"Let's go to her," Smirnov proposed.

He told them on the way that they had had a visit from the construction chief and Genka's father. Batmanov had had a talk with the boys and girls and given Tatyana and him a wigging.

They found Tanya in the leading team, which was choosing the route for the wire suspension. The linemen were clearing a path on a hill slope thickly covered with tangled underbrush. Tanya in a white sheepskin coat, black *valenki* and red knitted woollen cap stood slightly apart next to three young birch trees which seemed to be growing out of a single root. A campfire crackled merrily at her feet, shooting up yellow tongues of flame.

She turned round upon hearing the crunching of the snow, but betrayed neither surprise nor joy at the sight of the engineers. Only her long rime-covered eyelashes quivered slightly.

Kovshov, who was in the lead, drew the girl to him in a friendly embrace. Interpreting his gesture aright, she clung to him and touched his cheek with her lips. The caress of her chilly lips in the freezing air moved Kovshov.

"Greetings, mistress of the taiga.... Good day to you, fair maiden!..."

"And what is there for me, Little Red Ridinghood?" Beridze said, coming up.

Tanya looked at him and burst out laughing.

"Why, Santa Claus! For you there'll be just 'how d'you do.'"

Beridze did in fact resemble Santa Claus with his shaggy hoarfrosted beard and whiskers and the knapsack on his back. Tanya gave him her hand, which she drew out of her invariable red mitten. Beridze dropped his ski staffs and big mittens on the snow and took her hand affectionately in both of his.

"Oh, you have frozen me already!" Tanya said, as he squeezed her hand. "Santa Claus!"

"That's all right, I'll soon thaw out and become a middle-aged man of the Caucasus again," Beridze said bending over the fire and rubbing down his beard.

Kolya picked up the twigs lying about and tossed them into the flames. Alexei and Tanya moved up to the fire. Tanya asked the engineers all in one breath about the construction plans, and the news at headquarters, and their common acquaintances. One might have thought she had not seen them for a year.

"Serafima sent you some patties," Alexei said. "We ate them up, of course, and remembered you and Serafima with a kind word. They would have been like stones by this time anyhow, and I don't think you would have cared for them. We also had a bag of meat dumplings for you, but some cheeky beastie stole them while we were resting."

"I would eat some hot patties or dumplings with pleasure," Tanya said gravely. "Or some red *borshch* with pork. I wouldn't mind some good wine either."

"I can get my flask out if you want, eh? With some canned food for a snack. Will you have some?" Beridze offered.



Tanya made a wry face.

"Hard liquor and canned food! Is that what you treat girls to?"

Warming her hands over the campfire, she told them about her work. There was neither bragging nor complaint in her words, yet Beridze's face clouded as he vividly pictured the hardships the girl had suffered in the last three weeks.

Unused to life in the open, the work party had found it hard going at first. Not all the members of the Komsomol proved equal to the ordeal. Two boys quit on the first week, and the general meeting branded them as deserters. The girls cried, and one of them asked to be sent back to town.

"The first few days it seemed simply impossible to be out in the frost all the time," Kolya said, breaking in on Tanya's narration. "Even the braver boys were afraid to sleep in the taiga. Not a soul all round!"

Notwithstanding the careful preparations Tanya had made for the expedition while at headquarters, the party found themselves up against unpleasant surprises at every step. There was a shortage of certain materials, and there were practically no really skilled

workers in any of the teams. The supply base had to be moved every day, and it was difficult under these conditions to arrange life on more or less tolerable lines. But the main difficulty was working in the frost. There were things that couldn't be done in mittens, and the youngsters' bare hands instantly froze. There had been many cases of frostbite at the beginning, and neither vaseline nor other remedies had been of any help. Even now the frost was in many ways a nuisance, to say the least.

"I apply the method of personal example," Tanya said with a smile. "I've become quite a trainer. It's a cold training both literally and figuratively—in other words, strict. I've got them practically used to washing themselves with snow, drinking ice water and sleeping without sleeping bags, I make them do gymnastics and go in for sport. Whining and complaining is taboo. I try to make them see that all our hardships are nothing to what our fighting men are enduring at the front. Kolya is a great help to me—he has a big influence on all the youngsters. I don't know what I would do without him." She cast a grateful look at Smirnov who was tossing twigs into the fire.

Tanya took her mitten off to straighten her hair. Beridze gently took her swollen red hand with its broken fingernails in his.

"It's not so bad when there's no wind," Tanya continued. "But when the wind blows it's simply hell. It often tears off the wires, and we have to run up one piece of wire several times. And someone is sure to be frostbitten in the process. I sometimes see them fighting back the tears. . . ."

"You are doing fine, Tatyana Petrovna," Beridze said earnestly. "You've gone more than half way. This beats all records for wire suspension."

He imparted some advice. His beard and moustache had thawed and grown black again. He looked tenderly and wistfully at Tanya, slim and girlish in her white sheepskin coat belted at the waist. She lent Beridze an attentive ear, the while she gazed into the fire.

"You are too kind to me, Georgi Davydovich," Tanya said, looking up. "Batmanov was dissatisfied with me, and he told the boys and girls: 'you've got a soft-hearted boss.' Why does he always find fault, is that a method of his? I try to imagine what he's like

at home. His wife must be afraid of him. Is it so bad to be nice to people, to have a kind word for them sometimes?"

"You are not fair to Batmanov. His family is stranded in the Crimea," Beridze said reproachfully. He did not know about the news Batmanov had received.

Tanya lowered her head and then quickly looked up again.

"All the more reason why he should be more considerate toward others."

"More considerate? He should be fair to people. And kind too, but inwardly, not in words," Alexei put in. "In my opinion, Batmanov is a kindly man. He is good to people, but he doesn't spoil them by senseless kindness, stroking their heads whether they deserve it or not."

Kolya sat down on a heap of twigs and regarded Alexei intently.

"I've often thought about that—how should a superior treat his subordinates? It's a question that must be settled in your own mind. And I have come to this conclusion: we are living and working in a difficult time, under strenuous conditions, and you can't train people by ostentatious kindness. I believe in 'cold' training," Alexei smiled. "I

suppose you realize, Tatyana Petrovna, why Batmanov spoke to you so sharply."

"He wanted to justify her severity toward the boys and girls by being severe himself," said Kolya.

"Quite right!" said Alexei. "There are mothers who kiss and fondle their children and pamper them in every way. And there are mothers who are strict with their children, punish them when they deserve it, and kiss them rarely, chiefly at night when they are asleep. I vote for the strict mother! She's not only a loving mother, she brings up her children properly. Her attitude towards her children is not only that of heart, but of mind. Her children will amount to something. And they won't love their mother any the less for her strictness! Good heavens!" Alexei pulled up short. "I've delivered a whole speech."

"Go on, Alexei," Tanya begged. His words had kindled the girl's interest.

"There's nothing more to say. It's stern love. Batmanov's attitude towards you is probably the same as yours is towards these kids."

They sat on in silence. The fire crackled loudly in the surrounding stillness.

"I've been looking forward to your coming, you two," Tanya began in a low voice. "It was so good to see you suddenly, here amid the taiga. We've had a good heart-to-heart talk. But I almost wish you had passed us by.... It will be harder than ever when you go away. I will think of you when you are gone. I shall think of Batmanov too, Alexei." She looked at the now subdued faces of the engineers and laughed. "The hostess has upset her guests, what a shame!"

"We shall stay here overnight. In the evening we'll have a chat with the teams, and fix up some supper. Do you agree?" Beridze asked.

"Oh, no! By no means!" Tanya protested. She got up. "You must go as soon as you can. It will be better for me and for the others. My love for them is a stern love, as Alexei said. Batmanov has thrown in a little more severity for good measure. But with kind Santa Claus around we're liable to break down altogether. By the way, Batmanov ordered me to drive you out at once as soon as you put in an appearance. So run along!..."

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, hurrying us off like this? We might freeze to death," Beridze pleaded in a piteous voice.

"Nothing will happen to you. The Nanai camp Chomy is only nine kilometres from here and you'll be able to make it before dark."

Wishing to leave Beridze alone with Tanya, Alexei went over to the team working near-by, taking Kolya with him. Beridze's words, uttered sadly, reached his ears:

"Haven't you even one kind word for me, Tanya? I've been dreaming for days of this moment!"

"Please don't!" the girl cried in a tone of bitterness and annoyance. "Don't you understand that this is not the time to speak about that?..."

"Our Tatyana has grown rather hard," Kolya observed. "She's been looking forward so eagerly to this meeting, and now she's driving you away...."

"She's right," Kovshov said.

When they went back to the campfire they found Beridze and Tanya peacefully discussing business. The linemen were having great difficulty in soldering the wire ends, a painful operation in these winter conditions. Tanya had racked her brains for a way of improving it and had at last devised an automatic soldering appliance. Beridze approved the idea and promised to have the ap-

pliance made urgently at the head office workshops. The girl hastily sketched a plan of the automatic device in the chief engineer's notebook, interrupting her work every now and then to warm her freezing fingers over the fire.

Half an hour later the engineers had put three kilometres between themselves and the wiring party. Occupied each with his own thoughts, they had not exchanged a word all the way.

A sudden gust of wind drove a cloud of snow dust into the travellers' faces. Beridze raised his head and looked round. The sky, only recently clear, was overcast, and the forest took on a sombre hue.

"Shmelev was right. We shouldn't have listened to Tatyana, we ought to have waited for the storm to blow over," Beridze said.

"I can understand why she was in such a hurry to get rid of us," Alexei retorted. "You're not very tactful with her, you treat the affair rather lightly. She's a good girl, Tanya, one in a thousand."

"Lightly? Are you mad?"

"I can see your attitude."

"Ha, he sees my attitude! The psychologist!" Beridze snorted and glared at Kovshov.

"I don't have to be a psychologist to see it. As a sincere friend of both of you I tell you —you're likely to nip in the bud whatever genuine feeling may arise between you two."

"You keep your lectures to yourself!" snapped Beridze and darted forward on his skis.

Alexei quickened his pace too. A violent gust of wind swept through the forest. Under its impact the trees creaked, the frozen brushwood tinkled and a cloud of snow and pine needles were blown up from the ground.

Beridze halted and stood waiting for Alexei to come up.

"You're a funny chap—don't you see that I love her? She's here and here all the time." He slapped his chest and head with his mittened hand. "I fell in love with her the moment I saw her—d'you remember the day we saw her coming down the Adun on skis? Do you believe in the kind of love that hits you suddenly like a blow on the head? A new person has crossed your path yesterday, and today you feel a different man, everything in you sings and rejoices. I know, I understand Tanya's worth. She's the sweetest girl alive!..."

Kovshov stared at his friend dumbfounded. He had never seen him like this before. Amazed, he reflected that one could never fully fathom the soul of another human being, even if that human being was one's closest friend.

"I understand, Alexei," Beridze said with feeling. "You're afraid for Tatyana's sake, and you wish me well. You doubt the sincerity of my feelings and are inclined to put it down to my temperament. But we have known each other for three years and have become great friends—now, can you remember my ever having told you that I was in love? Did I ever unburden myself to you?"

"No," Alexei admitted.

"That means this is the first time I'm in love! I'd agree to anything, so long as she returned my love. I can wait, I can keep my mouth shut, I can suffer living apart, if she insists. But, I can't live without her! I simply can't! It was all I could do to tear myself away from her, and now I'm capable of running back to her, like a schoolboy!..."

Beridze looked searchingly at Alexei.

"I daresay you too have heard the wiseacres' claim that: 'men nowadays are not capable of real love.' It's a lie. We *are* capable of loving! Only we don't die for love! We

move mountains for the sake of love! We grow stronger, and better, and cleaner through love! Isn't your love for Zina like that?"

Alexei had been thinking so himself. His love for Zina had also come to him with the suddenness of a blow. He now believed that Beridze really loved Tanya with a sincere devoted passion, that he was incapable of any shallow emotion.

"Georgi, my dear fellow ... I wish you happiness," he said.

Grey murk filled the sky, and snow began falling thickly. The gusts of wind grew more violent. The engineers had not gone more than a kilometre when a raging blizzard broke over their heads.

Beridze and Kovshov halted in dismay. The world around them was a howling, crashing inferno. The thick boughs snapped and broke in the wind, and the huge trunks swayed from side to side. The outlines of the near-by trees stood out for a moment through the white pall only to disappear again as a new gust of wind swept them. The taiga groaned and wailed like a creature in pain.

Beridze dragged Kovshov to the protection of a thick tree and shouted in his ear:

"We're in for it, Alexei! Let's hang on by the skin of our teeth. I say—let's hang on! You stick near me. Stick near me, I say, otherwise you're done for!"

Progress was possible only between the brief lulls in the blast. Alexei blindly followed Beridze, who still kept the trail by some miraculous instinct. At every fresh gust of wind the skiers stood stock-still and crouched low. Somewhere near-by a tree fell with a terrific crash. Beridze sprang aside, drawing Alexei after him.

"We must get out of here onto the Adun! I say, get out into the open! Otherwise we'll be crushed to death!" Beridze shouted.

The blinding snowstorm increased in violence and trees crashed to the ground with every fresh impact of the wind. The engineers struggled on doggedly in the teeth of the blast, now dropping to their knees on the snow, now rising again.

They succeeded in fighting their way out onto the river. Here in the open the going was still harder. The icy gale drove a hard gruel of snow and earth into their faces and chests. The thin ski poles were buffeted in their hands like sails. The stinging wind chilled them to the bone. Beridze was barely

able to move his skis, but he did not stop, and Alexei, bent almost double to protect his face from the cruel blasts, held on grimly at his side.

A particularly violent squall knocked them off their feet. Alexei felt himself being lifted bodily from the ground and flung into a snowdrift. Beridze struggled near-by. He clutched Alexei and shouted into his face with gasping voice:

"We mustn't stop!" The wind carried his words away, and he was obliged to repeat them. "We mustn't stop, I say! Keep going for dear life! Don't stop, I say, on no account! Don't be afraid, we'll get out of it! The main thing—don't lose courage! I say, keep your chin up! Take shelter behind my back! Hide behind my back, I say!"

"Stop comforting me, I'm not a baby!" Alexei yelled in reply.

They stumbled to their feet and stood shuffling for a minute or so on one spot. Beridze, with a great effort, pulled out his revolver and fired two shots in the air, more to cheer up his comrade than in expectation of assistance.

Walking was now out of the question. The engineers crawled along on all fours,

stopping every now and then to catch their breath. The hurricane swooped down on all sides, now arresting their progress, now forcing them back, now suddenly attacking them from behind, now hurling itself on them from above and bending them to the ground, now sweeping up from below and lifting them off their feet.

Beridze was fully aware how desperate the situation was, but his thoughts were all for Alexei.

"Never say die, Alexei!" he shouted

Beridze pulled his freezing hand out of the mitten and thrust it under his shirt to warm it. Then he gripped his revolver again. The faint report was drowned in the roar and howling of the wind.

They crawled along for a long time—it may have been an hour, it may have been three. Beridze made no more efforts at conversation, and stopped now and again only to fire a shot. And then came the moment when he pulled the trigger and heard no answering shot....

CHAPTER FIVE

A STRICT SCORE

IN NOVINSK the snowstorm had been raging unabated for nearly three days. It knocked down fences and telegraph poles, tore up the flimsy little wooden sheds and dashed them to the ground. During the night a gust of wind tore off the roof of the four-storied head office building. It fell flat on the loose snowdrifts and looked from afar like a house buried to the roof in snow.

Kuzma Kuzmich Topolev could not prevail upon himself to sit at home. He braved the wild elements and ploughed waist-deep through the snow of the street for over an hour before he reached the head office. Safe in his private office he spent considerable time shaking off the snow and patiently pulling the icicles out of his beard and moustache, his breath coming in gasps. He set-

tled himself in the armchair without taking off his heavy fur coat, drew a file of papers out of the desk and prepared to write. But that was not to be. The ink was frozen and bulged out of the inkpot in a lump of violet ice.

Topolev suddenly remembered the look of boyish amazement on Alexei Kovshov's face when he first saw a similar lump of frozen ink on his writing desk. A smile crossed the old man's face at the memory of Alexei's gay laugh. Seeing that he would not be able to write a single line, he pushed the papers away from him and stared musingly at the window. He had to admit to himself that he missed Alexei and the atmosphere of restlessness and activity that surrounded him.

Ill though he was on account of the weather and the emotional stress under which he laboured, Kuzma Kuzmich had nevertheless come regularly to the office all these days. Not so very long ago everything here had seemed to him so disagreeable—this chilly office, cold as a cellar, the constant ringing of the telephone, the endless stream of visitors, the noisy conferences and discussions of the construction plans, the self-confident and amazingly tireless industry of Kovshov—

"that whippersnapper," as Grubsky derisively called him.

Topolev, of course, understood at once why his superiors had installed him in this turbulent place. They wished him to be fired by the interests of the construction job. And this, not to mention many other things, roused in him an opposition which he vented in what was called a formal attitude towards his official duties. Like Grubsky, Topolev had not believed in the ability of Beridze and Kovshov to alter what had been so thoroughly elaborated in the ten volumes of the old plans. He had regarded them as newcomers capable only of criticizing and scoffing at what had been done before them, and making much noise instead of applying themselves quietly and unobtrusively to serious work. Grubsky had argued with them and tried to prove his point. Topolev had smiled contemptuously.

He thought of all this now with chagrin and perplexity. He no longer felt any hostility towards Alexei, nor for that matter towards Beridze. Everyone at headquarters was anxious about the fate of the engineers, who had been caught somewhere in the blizzard. Topolev too found himself waiting for news of them with a growing feeling of alarm. He

was crushed with a sense of guilt at the remembrance of how unfriendly his retort had been when Alexei had turned to him with a good-natured: "Well, wish us good luck, Kuzma Kuzmich. We're going after something big and we'll come back with a new plan in our bag." And he had answered—he could bite his tongue now for it: "I don't see anything big about it, just an ordinary ski outing. I wish you a pleasant time. And the plan is not a cat to be carried about in a bag."

What folly, what stupid folly! Who cared for these perversities—this injured vanity, these fits of sullenness, the crotchets of an old man? By keeping aloof from the main job and dabbling in trifles he had only been the loser, yet all his life he had been a believer in work on a big scale. Work! He needed it more than he did air. But Alexei was not here, and the old man did not know how to get back into harness. He felt himself superfluous here, thanks to his self-elimination. The telephone was silent, there were no callers, the clock on the wall had stopped, and now even the ink had frozen in the inkwell.

Unable to endure the solitude, Topolev left his office to roam aimlessly about the building. The people he met greeted him

with friendly smiles. He looked into each face, responded to each greeting and passed on—none of them held his attention. Liberman in a pony-skin jacket and a shaggy fur hat of some mysterious origin, stopped Kuzma Kuzmich in the corridor. Rubbing his ruddy nose and cheeks he cursed the weather roundly as "more fit for dogs than humans." Catching sight of the snuffbox in the old man's hand, he asked for a pinch, drew the snuff noisily into his wide nostril, grimaced and sneezed with great zest.

"Taking it easy, Kuzma Kuzmich?" he enquired in a patronizing tone. "You ought to be at home on a day like this. Goodness gracious, no one could hold it against an old man like yourself!"

"Yes, I'm taking it easy," barked Topolev and losing interest in the other, stalked off without pausing to ask whether Liberman had heard any news about Beridze and Kovshov.

Returning to his office, Topolev sat motionless in his chair for three hours, waiting for something that did not happen.

True, Grubsky dropped in, looking ridiculous in huge grey *valenki* and fitch-lined coat with beaver collar raised.

"Our discoverers of America appear to have got frozen on the Adun together with their hot ideas," he said in a shrill voice, breathing into his fist.

The old man looked at him piercingly and wonderingly, as though he were seeing him for the first time. Words failed him. A feeling of uneasiness swept over Topolev as the thought suddenly struck him that in this grotesque and possibly malicious man was concentrated all that had complicated his life during these last few weeks. Was it only weeks and months? Had it not been perhaps years?

He was glad that Grubsky, suddenly remembering something he had forgotten, quickly took himself off. A belated reply to his former patron came to Topolev's mind after he had gone. "I look at you, my dear Pyotr Yefimovich, and simply can't make you out—by what right do you call yourself a Russian? Where's your Russian breadth of scope, your love of the new? What is there Russian left in you? You have long been a worshipper of the alien gods of science and engineering, while you dismissed with a wave of your dry little hand the golden outcrops that lay all around you. And so it seems you had no faith either in your own powers or in the

creative powers of your countrymen. All you had was self-assurance based on fat reference books. And what are you now? A nullity!..."

Such, approximately, were the terms in which Topolev's indictment was couched. This, however, was followed by bitter words of self-recrimination: "But aren't you at one with him? Aren't you doing your utmost to prove that Topolev and Grubsky are birds of a feather?" The thought of this was so painful that Kuzma Kuzmich's mind rebelled against it.

No one else came in to see him. Two or three people put their heads in at the door, but it was not Topolev they needed. Zhenya Kozlova in a coat and white woolly shawl opened the door and glanced over the room from the threshold without noticing the old man.

"Come in, young lady," Kuzma Kuzmich said in a hoarse bass.

Zhenya said good morning, and after a moment's hesitation walked in. Topolev knew her as Tanya Vasilchenko's friend, and for some reason it seemed to him that he had known both girls a very long time, ever since childhood, though he had never met them before he came to the construction job. Koz-

lova had lately been in the habit of calling for Alexei to go to the dining room together, and had often dropped in on business errands for Grechkin, or simply just for the sake of seeing him. From the way the girl usually sat meekly on the sofa gazing at Alexei, Topolev understood that he was more to Zhenya than a mere co-worker.

"It's empty here, isn't it?" he said sympathetically, raising his eyebrows. "An old man sitting at his desk, dumb and dead—he doesn't count. And the one who should be here is absent. It ought to be the other way round, eh Zhenya?"

"Kuzma Kuzmich, there's no news about them at all. I'm so frightened!" Her voice and her big bright eyes expressed anxiety. "I'm ready to put my skis on and go and look for them myself. They've been trying to get Tatyana on the line, but there's no connection. The blizzard must have damaged it. What's to be done, Kuzma Kuzmich?"

"There's no reason to worry. They must have taken shelter in some suitable spot," Topolev said in a reassuring tone, but Zhenya's words had deeply disturbed him. "Let's sit a few minutes and have a chat, my dear. Well, what's going on in the world?"

The recent communiqué hadn't been any more cheerful, Zhenya told him. There was fighting at the approaches to Moscow, and rumours were abroad about the Japanese, who were making a nuisance of themselves again at the frontiers. Zalkind had organized a Communist and Komsomol team for checking the work of the departments, and she had been included in it—Zalkind had asked her to handle Fedosov's and Liberman's departments. There was a conference at the Party organizer's today at which she was to speak, and she was very nervous about it. That night they had finished drafting the quarterly plan, and Grechkin had not been able to find a single fault in her tables, try as he might. She did all the calculations for labour planning—that wasn't a thing to be sneezed at!

This was Zhenya's pet phrase which she often used when wishing to stress anything of importance. As she uttered it now Zhenya sighed and made for the door. The old man rose from the armchair.

"Come along, Zhenya, let's see if we can't find Tanya together."

They went into the selector room, and spent a full hour there shouting into the

mouthpiece in turns. The line reproduced all the fury of the elements—they could hear the wild moanings of the blizzard, and the howling and whistling of the wind. And suddenly, incredibly, amid this all, came the voice of Tatyana sounding extremely remote.

"Where's Alexei and Beridze? Where's Alexei? What do you know about them?" Zhenya shouted into the telephone in a voice that was almost a sob.

Tanya's voice sounded loud and near one minute, then faded away and was drowned in the noise.

"They passed the day before yesterday... the day before yesterday.... I can't forgive myself—for not detaining them...." Tanya's words came through for a second and instantly faded. "They wanted to stay overnight at my camp. I'm worried. I'm very anxious."

Zhenya threw off her shawl. She felt hot, and her fluffy hair was dishevelled. She fell silent and sat staring distractedly before her. Topolev took up the conversation. He asked Tanya again about the engineers, and she repeated what she had said.

"I'm fighting the blizzard," the girl said. "Tell the chiefs . Tell Zalkind—I've formed an emergency team—of the hardiest lads....

We shall keep in touch with you—don t worry—we shan't give in."

"Take care of yourself and the others!" Topolev cried hoarsely. "Take care of yourself! Are there any accidents? Any mishaps?"

"How's it with you? How's it with you?" came the girl's answering shout. "Any good news?"

He shouted himself into a fit of coughing.

"No good news! Bad! Bad! I say bad! Tanya!"

She understood at last.

"What's bad? Something with Volodya? Is it to do with Volodya?"

"Almost," he answered vaguely. "Almost with Volodya! Almost!"

"What post?" the girl demanded. "What are you mumbling there, granpa? What post? Why don't you speak?..."

Zhenya, suddenly coming to herself, ran back to her office. Kuzma Kuzmich went back to his and resumed his seat in the armchair. He sat several minutes, then painstakingly sharpened two pencils and made ready to write. Imperceptibly he found himself drawn into the circle of Beridze's and Kovshov's interests. The old man had latterly caught him-

self on more than one occasion dwelling on an idea which particularly concerned them—the problem of laying the pipe line across the strait. He was not so blind that he did not see and appreciate the daring and correctness of Beridze's solutions to the problems connected with work under winter conditions. The only problem they had not yet solved was that of digging a trench through the strait in winter conditions. Kovshov had put that question to him just as the old man had himself been speculating on it. An interesting idea had struck him, and his thoughts had reverted to it more and more often, until he had finally worked it out and was now convinced that the solution of this ticklish problem would be his, Topolev's.

His watch, a big silver turnip that had been his companion through life, showed the close of office hours. The old man gazed at the time-darkened dial and speculated whether he should go home or remain here. He could do his calculations and write his notes at home, in the warmth, but here he would get news about Alexei sooner. He paced up and down the office with his hands in the pockets of his fur coat—tall, grey, gloomy and whiskered, very much like Maxim Gorky.

A young girl suddenly came running in. To Topolev's surprise it was him she wanted.

"Whew, I've found you at last! I didn't even know we had an engineer by the name of Topolev," she said artlessly, unaware that she was wounding the old man to the very heart. "Alexei Kovshov always used to sit here—I know him well. So you're his assistant? Fancy that, an old man subordinate to a young one! I'll remember you now. Come along quick, the Party organizer invites you to a conference of the department chiefs."

And away she sped, before Kuzma Kuzmich could say a word. On the threshold he ran into Kobzev, dishevelled as usual. Zalkind had invited him too.

The conference had already opened. Zalkind greeted Topolev and Kobzev affably and invited them to sit down.

"I have called the department chiefs together with the local Party and Komsomol organizers to discuss discipline and our deficiencies. Go on," he said, nodding to Grechkin, who was standing by the table in an expectant attitude.

"As a result of our inspection all the defects that lay hidden in the depths of the departments have floated to the surface." Grechkin illustrated this floatation process with a gesture. "And I'm sorry to say that we cannot at present hold up any one department as a model to the others—as something to be emulated. There is slackness everywhere. We still have people who like to come late and leave early. There are some who try to find excuses for their slackness in the blizzards and difficult conditions." Grechkin made a sweeping movement towards the snowed-up windows. "Many people waste working hours loafing about the corridors and chatting on matters that have no relation to official duties, and too much time is spent dawdling in front of the map discussing the situation at the war fronts. They forget that we won't help the front by sighs and amateur strategy. It's not a very pleasant thing to say, but it's a fact. There's no concealing that the staff in some departments don't yet realize that the needs of the construction line are their primary consideration, that we here are servants of the line and exist for the line, and not vice versa."

Grechkin spoke warmly and sharply, accompanying his speech with energetic gesticulations. The others listened intently. Since the change in the management of the construction job, this economist, or practical economist as he preferred to call himself, with his natural intelligence and his capacity for working twenty hours a day if need be, had begun to play an important role in the life of the head office. Batmanov had put him in charge of the control of plan fulfilment and Grechkin reported at all the dispatchers' conferences called by the construction chief. Grechkin's Party work was likewise keenly felt by the whole collective. And now from his speech it was clear that he had carried out the Party organizer's assignment conscientiously, and had been both strict and exacting in verifying the work of the departments.

"What I've said is a sort of preamble," Grechkin wound up, his round keen eyes taking in the assembly with a swift glance. "The comrades who have been investigating the various departments will tell you themselves what they have found."

Zalkind opened the discussion with a short speech.

"Don't beat about the bush, comrades, ventilate all the sore points frankly and openly. Criticize without fear of offending a nice chief or a good friend. All together we are strong enough to stand it, criticism won't do us any harm, it will only do us good. I give ten minutes to each speaker, so no time will be wasted in empty talk. We have no right to spend too much time at meetings. Try to keep to the point and avoid petty squabbles, intrigues, and gossip."

And everyone spoke—briefly, not too smoothly and coherently perhaps, but earnestly and with obvious conviction that what he said was right. For some reason or other Topolev's pride was hurt. He saw that most of the speakers were young, quite young. Zhenya Kozlova was one of the first to be given the floor.

The girl stepped up to the table and began rather falteringly, her face flushed and eyes lowered. She had never had occasion before to speak at such meetings, and quailed at the thought of having to say harsh and unpalatable things about the chiefs of two big departments. Zhenya's heart was in her mouth, and she fought down a terrified impulse to break off and run away, as she had once done during an amateur concert.

Grechkin frowned with annoyance and even turned his face away. The girl was disappointing his hopes. Outwardly testy and hard to please, he had a soft spot in his heart for her and always tried to arouse her enthusiasm in the department's work. He once told Alexei in a tone of pride that he considered Kozlova his best worker. Alexei's suggestion that he should draw her more resolutely into the life of the Komsomol organization appealed to Grechkin. They had lost no time in calling the girl out and having a long talk with her about it.

Zhenya noticed that Grechkin was annoyed, and the thought flashed through her mind that he would certainly tell Alexei about her failure. This helped her to overcome her nervousness and confusion. She began to speak more confidently, and when she glanced at Grechkin again, his face wore a smile of approval.

Zhenya's team had discovered many irregularities in the supply department. Unanswered requisitions from the local works' sections, undispatched urgent telegrams and forgotten documents were found in the desks of Fedosov's employees. Fedosov himself had treated the inspection superciliously, without

due seriousness. In fact, here too, his frequent interruptions of her speech with flippant remarks showed that he treated the matter as a joke, and tried to explain away the charges by reference to the ever-growing volume of work in which individual oversights and errors were hardly noticeable.

"That's a wrong and harmful point of view!" Zhenya cried. "It provides a loophole for hiding all sorts of bad practices."

Then she passed on to Liberman's department, and accused its manager of "window dressing" and throwing dust in people's eyes.

The accusations were serious. The two managers had not expected this, though they had been warned beforehand by Zalkind.

But Zhenya had not said all she wanted to say, and her time was up. She glanced at her wrist watch and broke off in the middle of her speech. Zalkind nodded to her encouragingly.

"All sorts of ridiculous stories have long been current among us concerning the enmity between Liberman and Fedosov," Zhenya went on hurriedly. "I didn't take them seriously because I couldn't believe that grown-up, serious people could amuse themselves

with such tomfoolery. Now I see that there's something like war going on between the two departments. My father—he's dead now—lived a long time on the Adun, and he used to tell me about the feuds that existed among the Nanai clans. That's all a thing of the past now, except for isolated cases—father called them survivals of the tribal system. And when I listened to Liberman telling tales on Fedosov, and Fedosov on Liberman, I remembered father's words and thought—these squabbles between our two department chiefs are also a survival of past ages."

"That's putting it a bit too strong, my girl!" Fedosov called out.

"No it isn't," Zhenya parried, turning round swiftly and spreading her hands. "Tell me, comrades, don't you consider it a crazy survival of the past when two Soviet men in charge of allied departments start putting spokes in each other's wheels? Perhaps that's what they call Socialist competition?"

Several people applauded Zalkind leaned over the table to hide a smile.

"You can't blacken people's characters like that without any proofs," Liberman said when silence was restored.

"Oh, so you want facts? All right, I'll let you have them."

She gave facts—they were both damning and ludicrous. Zhenya suddenly broke off, stepped up swiftly to Liberman and addressed him in a voice husky with emotion, seeming oblivious to the presence of the others.

"Why do you dislike people so much? Why isn't there any kindness in you? I know that you're an honest man, you won't touch what doesn't belong to you. But is that real honesty? You often boast—'I always get whatever we need—nobody can get things the way I can.' That's probably true. But what is the good of it? What if you did get a thousand padded jackets when they're lying in storage while the people at Section Seven are going without them and freezing and cursing you for all they're worth. What do you care as long as the chiefs praised you for getting those jackets? I found four telegrams in your department from Section Three. They have run out of groats You took no notice of those telegrams, because your chief concern is to get the groats. You got them, and the rest doesn't matter to you...."

Liberman sat with hunched shoulders, and his fair eyelashes blinked rapidly. He

wanted to protest but Zhenya gave him no chance to interrupt.

"Tell me," the girl plunged on doggedly in a voice still deep with emotion. "What is your idea in getting all these jackets, groats and many other things? Is it only for the sake of having people say 'What a good supply man Liberman is—he can get anything!'? That cuts no ice whatever. It's your business to see to it that people are fed and clothed and kept warm in the cold weather. You have no heart. If you ask me you have ambition in place of a heart."

Zhenya stopped and stared about her in some confusion.

"Goodness gracious, who's interested in all this girlish gushing!" Liberman flung out, stealing a furtive glance at the Party organizer.

"I am, for one. And so are all the other comrades. But most important, it's good for you to hear," Zalkind said crisply, looking hard at Liberman. Then he turned to Zhenya and threw her a friendly smile. "Go on. . . ."

Grechkin hugged himself He could not tear his eyes off Zhenya. "Who knew better than I that her chief interest and pleasure were

dancing and the choral circle. But Alexei and I have drawn her into Komsomol work—and there you are," Grechkin told himself with satisfaction. Zhenya resumed her speech, and suddenly Grechkin heard his own name mentioned. He had not expected to have his own corns trod on. He did not take offence, however, and nodded to her when he caught her eye.

"Even Kovshov and Grechkin, Communists and members of the Party Bureau," Zhenya said—"even they don't place enough trust in us; they try to do everything themselves. But we know too well that no one man can cope with a task which only the collective is capable of tackling. That's all I wanted to say, Mikhail Borisovich. Yes, in conclusion I want to say that I am glad this meeting of ours was called, I like the idea very much, only it's a pity that Comrades Kovshov, Beridze and the construction chief are not here. Some people might get the impression that we only have the courage to be frank when they're not here."

"Don't let that worry anyone," Zalkind retorted. "Consider that Batmanov, Beridze and Kovshov are present at this meeting. I'll answer for them all."

Zhenya fell silent, pulled down the blue jumper that clung to her sturdy figure and went back to her seat beside Grechkin, glancing round to make sure that no one was laughing at her.

"Splendid," Grechkin whispered. "You'll soon beat Tanya hollow at this rate. And you didn't even spare your idol Alexei. That's the stuff!"

Zhenya stared at him with a vacant look and said nothing. Her soul was still in a tumult.

Topolev was more keenly sensitive than anyone else to what was being said. Everything that Zhenya and the others had said was addressed to him. "A survival of the past," he kept repeating to himself, and a sense of shame overwhelmed him. "One can sit side by side with them and be doing one and the same job, and yet be so remote from them," he thought bitterly. The old man was sure that his name would also be mentioned at the meeting. He feared it, yet strange to say, wished it..

Petya Gudkin was the next to speak. And it was he who spoke of Topolev. Petya launched out in almost a shout, then suddenly pulled up sharp as he glanced at the old en-

gineer. The latter's heavy gaze, and his entire appearance, so forlorn and pitiful, froze the lad into silence.

"Go on, Petya," Zalkind said, intercepting Topolev's glance and understanding the reason for the young technician's hesitation. "Comrade Topolev won't take offence at the truth. It's the interests of our undertaking you have at heart."

"Go on, Petya, I shan't take offence," the old man said huskily in a barely audible voice.

"Things are not right in our department," Petya went on in a strained faltering voice. "The collective is working, of course. the staff understands the task and is doing its level best. But we are dissatisfied with Comrade Topolev. He's a big engineer with great knowledge, but he's a poor help to Comrade Kovshov. And Comrade Kovshov, of course, is having a hard time of it. I've been watching him, and I don't think the man ever sleeps. The light burns in his office till four o'clock in the morning, and it's on again at eight o'clock.... We notice everything, and don't you think, Comrade Topolev, that we don't see what's going on in your private office."

Petya's hands fidgeted nervously. He drew a handkerchief out of his pocket, fiddled about with it, then thrust it back again.

"And here's the result—Alexei Nikolayevich is out on the line, and the department is left without a head. Comrade Topolev is supposed to be Kovshov's deputy, but he's not interested in the department. We go to Comrade Kobzev with all our questions, but he's not the deputy chief and he isn't responsible for the whole department. He's in a false position himself—he has to settle matters when there's a live deputy chief standing above him. Besides, he's absent-minded, and he can't handle everything."

"That's one on the nob for me!" Kobzev groaned, and clutched his head.

There was a general laugh.

"You needn't laugh, it's the truth," Petya said on a rising note of asperity. "I shan't speak any more if you're going to laugh."

"Go on, Petya, don't be angry, we're all listening," Zalkind said.

"We want to know why Comrade Topolev is keeping aloof from everything," the lad went on. "He's not interested in anything or anybody. Now take me, I'm the Komsomol organizer in the department and a rank-and-

file technician—has he ever spoken to me once or shown any interest in my work? He hasn't! Why? D'you mean to say he has nothing to ask me or tell me? We once asked Alexei Nikolayevich about Topolev, and he flew into a temper. 'Is he in your way, or what? My assignments ought to be enough for you. If they aren't, come and tell me, and I'll give you more.' Well, of course, we understand that Alexei Nikolayevich said that because he couldn't very well say anything else. . . ."

Petya produced his handkerchief again, dabbed his face with it, then rolled it up and thrust it back into his jacket.

"Today I would like to ask you a question, Comrade Party organizer, and Comrade Topolev as well. I suppose some people will think it funny again. I've been wondering—did Kuzma Kuzmich hear Comrade Stalin's speech on the sixth and seventh of November or didn't he. If he did and has remained indifferent, then I've got nothing more to say—I simply don't know what our attitude to him ought to be in that case. You'll excuse me, Kuzma Kuzmich, for nagging you like this. But we can't help feeling sore about it for your own sake and for Comrade Kovshov's sake. Especially since . . .

he and the chief engineer may have perished out there on the line. And you don't care. . . ."

The lad's voice quivered and broke. Petya fell silent, fumbled for his handkerchief, then waved his hand and rushed from the room, the door being conveniently behind him. Zalkind glanced at Zhenya and she hurried out after the lad, on the point of tears herself.

A painful silence ensued, a hush resembling that in a law court before sentence is pronounced. All looked at Topolev who sat with his head sunk low.

"We have no grounds whatever for bewailing our comrades," Zalkind said, rising from his seat. "They are both physically fit and I'm sure that nothing has happened to them. Zhenya Kozlova and Comrade Topolev succeeded in getting in touch with Tatyana Vasilchenko over the wire—she saw the engineers before the blizzard safe and sound. Is that right, Kuzma Kuzmich? Moreover I received some news today from the construction chief through the military pilots—he is on his way back. They'll probably all three turn up at any moment."

Petya Gudkin and Zhenya came back into the room. The technician stopped by the door, frowning.

"Have you finished your speech, Comrade Gudkin, or will you continue?" Zalkind asked, avoiding the smiling faces of the meeting. "We didn't quite get you. You waved your hand at us and ran away."

"I've finished," Petya said in a gruff voice.

"There you see, you're displeased with yourself. Your speech was quite all right until you got a fit of hysterics. Wait till Beridze and Kovshov hear how you bewailed them here."

The conference continued, only now Kuzma Kuzmich could no longer follow the proceedings. Petya's barbs had pierced too deeply. All the blows of the last few days seemed to have been concentrated in that one blow.

The dull relentless pain in the old man's heart grew more poignant every minute. His head felt heavy, and the thoughts thronged confusedly in his mind. No doubt Petya, Zhenya, Zalkind and the others were expecting him to speak. He ought to say something—yet what was there to say? He had nothing to say at the moment.

Zalkind understood the old man's state of mind, and so did the others. Topolev, al-

ways such an imposing forbidding figure, had altered before their very eyes. The man obviously felt ill—his eyes were inflamed, there was a hectic flush in his cheeks, and harsh wheezing sounds came from his chest. By all the signs he did not even have the strength to lift his head.

He looked up in a dazed sort of way to find Zhenya standing before him with a note in her hand from Zalkind. He slowly opened the note and sat staring at it a long time: "Kuzma Kuzmich, I wish you to properly understand both this youth and us all. We wish to have real respect for you. You are feeling bad just now—you are suffering from some emotional stress and are obviously ill. You had better go home. We shall talk it over afterwards, and I think we shall see eye to eye. I promise to let you know as soon as Beridze and Kovshov return." Topolev looked gloomily at the Party organizer and shook his head with a negative gesture intended to convey that he felt quite well "How does he know the state of my feelings and that I'm waiting for Alexei?" he wondered.

Zalkind was winding up the conference. His speech was laconic, free from generalities

and moralizing. He did not repeat what had already been said about the shortcomings, but spoke about means of remedying them. There was one phrase in particular in his speech, which, though apparently addressed to all, Topolev felt was meant specially for him:

"I'd like to remind you of Lenin's wise maxim: '... defeat is not so dangerous as the fear to acknowledge one's defeat and draw from it all the necessary conclusions.' "

Before the Party organizer had touched on the supply departments Fedosov passed a note to Liberman: "I think we ought to have a serious talk. If you don't mind I'll drop in on you at ten this evening." Liberman wrote back on the same note: "No objections." And when Zalkind with repressed vehemence said:—"It's a shame to speak here of what Zhenya called a survival, and I promise not to bring it up if Liberman and Fedosov give no cause for doing so"—both supply men, under the Party organizer's gaze, nodded their heads with alacrity.

Zalkind closed the meeting and hurriedly left the room. He overtook Topolev at the exit into the street where the snowstorm was raging.

"I'll drive you home," he said. "We'll drop in on Rodionova at the hospital—we both need her." And ignoring the old man's protests he piloted him to the waiting sledge.

Olga Rodionova with two assistant doctors was making her rounds of the hospital wards. An epidemic of the grippe had broken out in Novinsk about a week before. The wards were filled with patients and there were beds even in the corridors. On all sides one could hear coughing and sneezing and painful sighs. The blizzard penetrated here too through chinks in the walls and window frames, and it was chilly in the wards.

Olga stopped at each bed, listened to the patients' complaints, examined them and gave instructions to the assistants.

"You're ill yourself, Doctor," the patients told her, glancing at her swathed hands, her pale drawn face and bright feverish eyes.

"A doctor has no right to be ill," she answered with a smile, as she swiftly examined the patient.

She was told that Zalkind had come. She sent him word to wait, and did not go out to him until she had finished her rounds. Zalk-

ind remarked with concern that she did really look ill. Olga waved her bandaged hand.

"It's my old rheumatism. The only cure is a warm climate. That's impossible just now, so we had better put off talking about my ailments until after the war."

The outbreak of the grippe worried Zalkind, and he enquired what the situation was now. Olga said she had made a round of all the houses in the settlement in the last two days and had found the number of cases steadily increasing. The hospital was overcrowded, and the only alternative was to isolate the sick from the healthy in special rooms to be set apart for the purpose in the houses and common lodgings. This was more important at the moment than any medicine.

"What can I do to help?" Zalkind asked in a tone of concern.

"You must try to get people to understand the necessity of putting up with a little discomfort for a while so as to isolate the sick. Then bear in mind that rumours are rife among the population that the Japanese are supposed to have spread this illness—a sort of bacteriological warfare. These rumours interfere with our fighting the grippe. Then I

need firewood, the more the better. Let us have horses and carts and tell us where we're to get the wood, and we'll cart it down ourselves. You see how cold it is here. I must keep the place well heated day and night, whether wood is hard to get or not.... I need assistants. I'm not asking for doctors or qualified nurses—you can't recall them from the army. But the housewives can come and help. Why haven't we got a women's council here, Comrade Party organizer? We need it badly—not only I. We could do with an extra woman's eye at the nurseries and kindergartens, the common lodgings and dining rooms. Every organization has a women's council for social work headed by the chief's wife. Our chief hasn't a wife, so that is why we haven't got a women's council, I suppose. Why couldn't your wife take charge of our women's council, Comrade Party organizer? Has she got her hands so full at home that she can't spare any time? Apply your favourite saying to her—'the more work the better.' Those women who can't manage at home ought to take a lesson from Liza Grechkina. She has four children, yet she's been coming here for the last three days to do her social duty for an hour or two." Olga smiled.

"I think that will be enough for today—I can go on like this till tomorrow unless you stop me."

"Enough for the time being," the Party organizer agreed, and recapitulated: "So the sick must be isolated in the common lodgings, harmful rumours must be combatted, then we need firewood and housewives' aid. I've been thinking about the women's council and have already put my favourite thesis to my wife. The women's council will have a good deal of work to do in the matter of living conditions, especially among the unmarried folk. A good many of our specialists are living in the cold. I'll come again tomorrow, we'll continue this conversation, and then go up to town—perhaps we'll get help there. And now, Olga Fyodorovna, will you please examine this patient. I have had to drag him here almost by force."

"Kuzma Kuzmich a patient? This is a surprise!" She began fussing around the old man, paying no heed to his resistance. "You're caught this time! Now you won't be able to boast that you never had anything to do with the disciples of Aesculapius in all your life."

She took the old man's head between her hands and subjected his face to a long scrutiny.

"To bed at once, he has the grippe with a high fever," she said to Zalkind, while of Topolev she enquired in a low voice: "Is anything the matter, Kuzma Kuzmich?"

The old man did not answer. Zalkind hurriedly put on his fur hat with ear flaps and began hustling him out. He turned back from the threshold.

"I have no right to conceal it from you.... It is better for you to know.... If you think you can stand hearing bad news...." Zalkind hesitated and regarded Olga with a searching look.

"What is it, speak! I can face anything," Olga cried nervously, and there was a look of distress in her eyes.

"I have received information that Konstantin Rodionov was guilty of draft evasion. He got himself a job as doctor in a Red Cross train by fraud. To avoid being sent to the front, he decided to make himself a temporary invalid—drank some filthy stuff and accidentally poisoned himself."

Olga emitted a strange muffled sound in an effort to stifle the scream that rose to her throat.

"If ever you need my help," Zalkind said, "I don't mean the hospital—that's self-understood—but comradely help, personally, please don't hesitate. You can always count on me. . . ."

"Thank you. Personally—I don't need anything," Olga whispered.

Topolev, standing in the doorway, saw that Olga had received some grievous tidings. He looked at her from under his knitted brows with respect and compassion. All around him he saw signs of hard struggle. Even the adolescents and women entered it as courageous soldiers. How had it happened that he, engineer Topolev, had shirked the struggle? "Having discarded all desire, we know neither hope nor fear," he recalled a favourite verse. He repeated it now and inwardly rejected it.

CHAPTER SIX

THOUGHTS IN SOLITUDE

AT HOME a beneficent warmth enveloped the old man. He had prepared the dwelling for winter himself, and no winds could blow out the precious calories. Marya Ivanovna, his landlady, with whom he lodged and boarded, regarded Topolev with anxiety. Zalkind had warned her that her lodger was ill.

"Don't worry, I'm quite well," Kuzma Kuzmich told her. "It's quiet here and warm, and I need nothing more."

He took from his pocket the powders Rodionova had given him and thrust them away into a drawer of his desk, then he removed his jacket and lay down on the sofa, pillowed his head on his bony fists and shut his eyes. During Petya Gudkin's speech at the conference the old man had wanted to get home as quickly as possible, but not in search of

peace. Now at last he was alone with his own thoughts.

Petya, Zhenya, Zalkind, Olga, Alexei, and Tanya—they all rose before him, and then suddenly receded, drew back to make way for someone infinitely sterner and more exacting. That stern and austere someone cried: "Let us have it out," and began speaking in different voices, now sounding like Petya, then like Olga, and Zalkind, and Alexei. But all these voices were drowned by the voice of his nephew Volodya, crying in despair:

"Just think of it, uncle, Ivan Semyonovich Mironov, our general, is no longer among the living! We were both in the same battle for Moscow. I am alive, but he is dead. Better it were the other way, uncle, do you understand me? We swore here, his men and officers, to avenge his death till our last breath."

Ivan—Ivan Mironov and death—the thought was monstrous, unbelievable! Kuzma Kuzmich groaned as the words of his nephew's brief letter, reiterated for the hundredth time, hammered at his heart.

"Hello, Kuzma," he suddenly heard the familiar mocking voice of Ivan Mironov, as he came into the room in the company of several intimate old friends who had long

faded away in the limbo of time. They strode in solemnly and bent over him, stricken down by suffering and sickness, and began speaking to him in young voices, reopening the old wounds in his heart: "Well, Kuzma, let's sum up. It's a useful occupation at a certain time of life, especially for one who has the grave not far from him. Tell us, comrade, what have you to boast of, what good have you done in life? It is said that you have cooled off and have as good as become one of those who consider it better to be a live dog than a dead lion. Is that true, Kuzma? We can hardly believe that you have forgotten those flaming speeches of yours which threatened to set fire to our little garret in the wooden house facing the Dnieper where we used to foregather. We can hardly believe that you have forgotten the oath we took at that memorable students' gathering—'to move ever forward and never stand still in sacred service of the people till death stills the beating of our hearts.'."

"It is said that you have grown fat, Kuzma, though you look lean. Your desires are said to have wilted, your brain to have become damped and clouded. You have grown

self-complacent and consider that you have overfulfilled your plan and have accomplished all that you wished to accomplish in life. They say some Grubsky or other, a small, petty man, has grown so considerable in your eyes that he has screened from you the real men. Grubsky has infected you with philistine self-contentment, and baited you with paper folders into which you have filed away all your old qualities and your engineering ability. You have become an office clerk whose world has narrowed down to the space of your writing desk and two filing cabinets crammed with papers. This prosaic entourage has supplanted for you the gallant sapper regiments of the common friend of our childhood and youth—Ivan Semyonovich Mironov. Answer, Kuzma, we wish to know what has happened to you."

And Kuzma Kuzmich answered, trying to vindicate himself before his stern judges:

"No, indeed, I have not forgotten the oath of my youth. It holds a sacred place in my memory. But something has happened, and this thing has got to be threshed out before it is too late. Many years have passed since we took that oath. We were all then, my friends, standing on the threshold of life. But

who, standing at the wicket, can know what awaits him on the broad thoroughfare of life? As far as I can remember I have always worked honestly and unstintingly. And, of course, I do not share the philosophy of the living dog or personal gain. What the devil do I want with those baubles, I, who have put my faith in lofty ideals, a man who has lived sixty years of life and tested all its values, from the greatest to the very smallest. No, obviously, we need not look here for the reason."

"Where, then, shall we look, my dear man?" someone asked. It was not Ivan Mironov—Ivan did not say a word, he only looked squarely into the face of his friend who lay there helpless before him.

"The reason apparently is that I, Kuzma Topolev, was once caught in some tempestuous torrent. It carried me along with it and I never had the time in this continuous hurry to take a look round and think about myself...."

"But was not this torrent of life the same both for you and for Ivan Semyonovich and for all of us? Or did you one day decide to leap out of it and observe things from the side? And then, lulled by Grubsky's

soothing whisper, you simply dozed off. Is that it?"

"Wait a minute, my friends, do not drive me. Life developed at an incredible tempo. The country compressed centuries into a few five-year periods. It grew and prepared itself for the coming trials. The torrent of life swept me along with it, I rode on the surface—by virtue of my work. Have I not given everything I was capable of giving?"

"Do you mean that you have completely expended yourself? Does that ever happen to a living person?"

"I never asked myself whether I was giving my all. I gave myself wholly and completely. The Revolution found us grown men of thirty-five. We all followed it at the first call. No one ever called me 'one of the old specialists' in the offensive sense of the term. None of us was tried by the people as a wrecker. I knew for what lofty aims my life was being spent, and I gladly accepted everything that was offered me. Yet you condemn me today and I myself have placed myself on trial before the stern judgment of conscience."

"Why have you fallen silent, Kuzma? Continue," his friends demanded.

"I had moments when it became clear to me that things do not turn out exactly as envisioned, do not coincide with the vows of youth. I unconsciously found myself waiting for at least a brief respite that would allow me to collect my thoughts and readjust myself, as it were. But life gave me no respite. It threw me from place to place, for ever building and building. I drove myself and was driven, then turned over what I had built and rushed off to some other place to build anew. Life moved faster and faster. The war forced the pace to the utmost. And then came the time of trials—for me, for Ivan Mironov, for all of us. Ivan, the general, withstood the test, his is the glory. But I...."

"What's the solution then, Kuzma? We don't understand," his friends pressed him.

It was a sharp question, a painful, galling question, and Kuzma Kuzmich cried:

"There is no solution! I gave in! I did not come up to scratch! I did not keep pace with life. I am now moving through inertia, and that will peter out at any moment. I cannot keep the pace: 'Urgent. Most urgent. Immediately. At once!...' I am only fit to be a noncombatant. Rather, I am not fit for anything. Old age has come, do you understand that or not?

I am yielding my place in life to that whippersnapper Alexei, a representative of the young generation."

"Hold on, Kuzma. Are you trying to revive the long forgotten talk about old and new specialists? Isn't General Mironov of the same generation as you? Why does he not talk about yielding his place to the young generation? Why was he fit and you not?"

"That's just the point, my friends. Between Ivan Mironov and me there is such a vast difference that I cannot compare myself to him. Let us leave him out of this conversation. Let us better bend our heads in veneration before the shield on which he lies, our hero. . . ."

There was a noise in the room. Kuzma Kuzmich opened his eyes. Marya Ivanovna was bending over him. In one hand she held a powder—she had found it after all—and in the other a glass of water.

"Kuzma Kuzmich, come drink it, my dear man. You're feverish, you've been moaning," she said. "This powder will do you good."

The old man obediently swallowed the powder. "Powders are just the things to cure

my ills," he thought with a grim smile. Marya Ivanovna, her peace of mind restored, left the room—she was a great believer in medicines.

Topolev shut his eyes again. But his friends no longer appeared to him. Petya Gudkin's thin freckled face and his tousled mop of reddish wiry hair flitted for a moment before him. Again he could hear him asking in an agitated voice: "Did Kuzma Kuzmich hear Comrade Stalin's speeches on the sixth and seventh of November or did he not?"

Dear boy, if you really wish to know, the whole thing started on the night of November sixth. He had, of course, heard Stalin's speech and had not remained indifferent to it. It was from this wise speech of Stalin's to the news of General Mironov's death and the accusatory speech by Petya Gudkin, the Komsomol member, that the thread of his sufferings was stretched. Now was the time when he ought to have a good talk with Alexei and ask his advice. The old man was prepared to bare his soul to the young engineer and settle with him these vital problems.

There he was, Alexei Kovshov, as large as life! A little above medium height, broad-shouldered and clean of limb, a skater,

skier and athlete. A good open Russian face. The separate features were not very regular or handsome—the forehead a little too broad, nose slightly tilted, rebellious fair hair and grey eyes. But taken as a whole it was a handsome face, because it was always lit up from within by the glow of intellect and feeling. He was calm, often thoughtful, and sometimes wistfully sad. His personality was mercurial. His passages from concentration and sadness to activity and cheerfulness were swift. He was fond of a joke, possessed a lively sense of humour which he indulged gladly, laughed heartily and infectiously revealing a row of strong white 'eeth. Everyone quickly took to him and many became attached to him. Beridze loved him as he would a younger brother. Grechkin and Filimonov in the space of a month had become intimate comrades of his. As for Zhenya, she was almost in love with him. Even Liberman, the cynic, was friendly disposed and unconsciously drawn towards him. Then why did he, Topolev, keep Alexei at arm's length? Why had they fallen out?

Tormented as he now was by thoughts of the rift between himself and Alexei, he found it difficult to name the cause for it. It had

to be traced back to the time of their first meeting. Alexei Kovshov had then appeared before him in the capacity of a superior called upon to investigate the work of engineer Topolev, a man whose name is mentioned in textbooks. And he, engineer Topolev, in full accord with engineer Grubsky, had immediately repudiated engineer Kovshov, without even being aware of the latter's merits. In the first place engineer Kovshov was scandalously young, young enough to be Topolev's son. He did not conform to his idea of an engineer, did not come up to his standard—and that had been sufficient to evoke his hostility. Topolev could not imagine an engineer who did not possess professional etiquette and respect for established authorities. Engineer Kovshov had broken these conventions. Engineer Kovshov had sat him down before him and had proceeded unceremoniously to rummage about in his solid work and find fault with it which he voiced aloud almost every minute as though this were the creation of an inexperienced novice and not that of a master mind of engineering.

The days went by, and he, Topolev, found himself against his will taking careful stock of the man who sat facing him. And

he perceived what Grubsky had so far failed to grasp. Before him sat an engineer of the new type, a master, a commander of all life and not only of technics. Engineering was his calling, his profession, but he did not confine himself to that alone; he was interested in everything. Engineer Kovshov considered of importance that which engineer Topolev disregarded. He was capable, for instance, of spending hours with Petya Gudkin, examining his work, when he could have merely rejected it and be done with it. On the other hand, things that were to Topolev complicated, he considered simple. One such question that was clear and simple to Kovshov was his attitude towards established authorities. If he disagreed with anything he challenged it, voiced his objections, repudiated it. Kovshov had undoubtedly heard of Kuzma Topolev when he studied at the institute, but now that he had met him he did not hesitate whatever in repudiating him. Grubsky's narrowness was simply foreign to Kovshov, distasteful. He was Beridze's subordinate, and respected discipline, but if he did not agree with the chief engineer he did not hesitate to argue his point with him. And if they should ever have any differences he would fight him

regardless of personal friendship and official relations.

These traits of the new, which at first were incomprehensible to Topolev and irritated him, steadily stood out more distinctly and clearly in the character of the young engineer. The old man remembered the time when Kovshov had been restless and miserable in his burning desire to go to the front, where the dangers and difficulties were greatest. But he soon realized that the struggle here for the new pipe line project was also part of the struggle for victory. His character crystallized the moment he found his place in the fight. That was why Alexei Kovshov was so insatiable for work, why in every little drawing he saw a matter of state importance. That was why he was so pitilessly exacting both to himself and to others, so strict and blunt to the point of brusqueness and even rudeness. When reprimanding his subordinates he did so with a jibe, to make them feel the sting. That young man, one could say, delighted in criticism. He was almost glad when hauled over the coals by Batmanov or Beridze, and even boasted of the fine wigging he had received. One day he had said with utter conviction: "There is

nothing more effective and beneficial than a deftly administered dressing-down from one's chief."

He worked with fervour. His duties were numerous, and he took them in his stride without seeming to tire. Petya Gudkin was right—engineer Kovshov had indeed almost weaned himself from sleep. He spent literally minutes on his meals, and was temperate in his personal needs to the point of asceticism. Zhenya had once reproved him for living uncomplainingly in a room in which it was as cold as in the street.

Yes, such was Alexei Kovshov. Of course, Kuzma Kuzmich also noticed the faults of his vis-à-vis—faults which could obviously be put down to his youth. Alexei Kovshov still lacked the experience of Topolev, accumulated through years of practice. As to his faulty manners—these would quickly and easily remedy themselves. More important was his lack of engineering culture. Kovshov sometimes groped blindly for what the old man could see at a single glance. He did not yet possess the facility in solving technical problems that comes with the mature skill of experience.

In the rush of work on the new project, errors in calculation and oversights were inevitable. Creative engineering is made up of numerous details, like a house of bricks, these details had to be fished up gradually like pearls, in the process of long years of work on construction jobs. Kovshov wanted to find these pearls in a few days. He, engineer Topolev, could have corrected Kovshov in some things, but he had not done so Kuzma Kuzmich winced as he bitterly admitted to himself that Alexei's oversights had more or less suited him. He had seemed to exult in them—"Smart, aren't you! Want me to plump down all the treasure I have accumulated farthing by farthing? Oh no, my dear boy, collect it yourself."

"How low you have fallen, you wretched Salieri of Adun," Topolev taunted himself.

One day, being particularly incensed with Alexei, Topolev had painted to himself a picture of Kovshov's inevitable degradation. The hurly-burly of life would swamp him too, and before he knew it he would become a second edition of engineer Topolev. Ever new duties would steadily pour down on him day by day—all kinds of requisitions, memoranda, drawings and estimates. He would not

be able to let the telephone out of his hand for a minute. There would be the endless plodding round of his superior's private offices on a hundred and one matters, hours of sitting at conferences and travelling about on errands of inspection. He would never rid himself of the sensation that he was constantly hurrying to answer a fire emergency call and always arriving late.

And so fatigue would steadily take its toll and Kovshov would gradually cool down. He would begin to grow indifferent to the daily round. His life would be spent in the backwoods—engineers build mostly in some remote out-of-the-way places—he would become addicted to wine, whist and frivolous pastimes. The trouble was not in these pastimes, but in the fact that he would derive greater pleasure from them than from his work. And he would beguile the hours with gossip in preference to passionate and lofty disputes. And perhaps he would marry, and he and his wife would begin avidly to accumulate petty possessions in the shape of chiffoniers, radiolas, clothes, furs and what not. He would buy a motorcycle and dash about the dusty roads for the sake of getting a thrill out of life. Or he would buy a camera and take

pictures of the photogenic faces of his acquaintances, or a gun to kill ducks and time with. In a word, he would turn to anything to amuse himself in his hours of leisure.

But then would come a day when he would begin putting away the technical magazines, with their pages uncut, behind the stove, and ultimately forget to renew the subscription. He would lose his zest for life, lose his sense of the new, and contract the dread disease of complacency and smug serenity. That was Grubsky's ailment, which he, Topolev, had also contracted. And Alexei Kovshov's talent, like an organism poisoned by cancer, would languish, and he would lose the capacity to create. He would become insensible to what one could call the distant perspective. He would be lured only by the near perspective, or rather the latter would screen from him the distant perspective. He would forget the vow of his youth, if he ever gave it, to forge steadily forward, not to rest on his laurels, to rise to new heights, and to know and do more and better today than he did yesterday. In short, the same thing would happen to Alexei as had happened to himself.

No! The old man stretched himself on the sofa and vigorously shook his head. No,

that could not, must not happen to Alexei! It was his duty, Kuzma Topolev's, the home-bred Salieri, to warn him, to prevent it. He must see Kovshov at once, this very minute, and speak to him about it....

There was a sound of footsteps in the room. The old man lifted his head with difficulty, passionately hoping to see Alexei, but he saw instead Grubsky. The latter's face was red from the frost, and he rubbed his hands quickly while he cast glances at the old man who was gloomily putting on his jacket.

"I thought I'd visit the sick man," Grubsky said ingratiatingly.

"The sick are visited by doctors and friends," Topolev said pointedly and not too hospitably, moving up to the table at which the former chief engineer was sitting. The old man stood holding on to the back of a chair.

"Our friendship is of twenty-five years' standing, Kuzma Kuzmich, you might almost call it a silver jubilee," Grubsky said in a cheery voice. "I'm always glad to avail myself of the opportunity of confirming my devotion to our old friendship."

"Bah, what a pompous speech," the old man thought, and aloud he muttered:

"If that's the case, I'm much obliged for the attention. I don't know what to offer you."

At that moment Marya Ivanovna entered the room.

"Don't you worry, Kuzma Kuzmich, I'll see to the tea."

"I've brought some medicine with me too," Grubsky said cheerfully, bringing out a large, dark bottle of wine.

"That medicine won't do for me. You'll have to take the cure yourself," Topolev rejoined.

Grubsky smiled to himself. "The old fellow's hospitable today, and no mistake." He began speaking about the grippe epidemic and the unpleasant aftereffects this illness had, about the blizzard which had wrought such havoc and played on everyone's nerves, but which, fortunately, was dying down, and about the situation at the war fronts.

Marya Ivanovna brought in the tea and a frugal repast. His efforts to ply the host with wine proving fruitless, Grubsky set the bottle aside and addressed himself to the hot tea.

Kuzma Kuzmich made little effort to keep the conversation going. He sat half averted, wondering what could have brought Grubsky

here. He refused to believe that this fine gentleman had braved the blizzard merely for the sake of paying him a friendly visit. They visited each other rarely, and had latterly grown estranged.

Topolev's irritation increased in proportion as Grubsky grew more confident. Kuzma Kuzmich checked the harsh words that rose to his lips. Nevertheless he had a feeling that this unexpected visit would end deplorably, that probably for the first time in all his sixty years of life he would drive an unbidden guest from his house.

Grubsky turned to the subject of the construction job. Batmanov and Beridze, he asserted, were committing a crime. Their mad project was not completely elaborated or sanctioned and they were already switching over the work to the new channel. Many of the works' sections which had been established on the right bank had thrown everything up and moved over to the left bank. Grubsky could not speak about this calmly. He got up, paced the length of the table, and sat down again.

"I have no doubt whatever that our 'inventive geniuses' will end badly!" he exclaimed. "But while they wield the power they

are doing almost irreparable harm. The People's Commissariat is under a false impression that everything is all right. The Government is being misled, and time and money are being wasted. And in general, what's going on here is an illustration of our bad organization. We may curse the Germans but that's no reason why we can't learn efficiency from them. They would never start building this pipe line at such a time."

The old man listened to Grubsky without uttering a word. Inwardly he was on his guard. He gradually began to guess the reason for this unexpected call.

"You, Kuzma Kuzmich, have already surrendered to the enemy, you have laid down your arms, so to speak. But I am told that all the people in Rubezhansk with any common sense consider this undertaking of Batmanov's and Beridze's a crazy, harmful idea," Grubsky went on, lowering his voice and bending his head towards Topolev. "We mustn't lay down our arms, we must prove our point in the most persistent manner. The pipe line cannot be built in a year, and in any case its construction will have no effect on the progress of the war. I must confess that I have been too timid and formal in de-

fending my point of view. We must be more firm. We must seek contacts in Rubezhansk and Moscow. The foundation can be considered as laid—I have sent that memorandum off to the regional authorities. You refused to sign it, probably on the spur of the moment. I have not taken offence, but I would ask you to follow it up with a note saying that you support it. And it would be splendid if you could see your way to write to Petrov in Moscow about the whole affair. He's a disciple of yours, in a way, and a personage these days—deputy people's commissar."

Topolev's face, bent over the table, was purple, his yellowish grey whiskers twitched, and his heavily veined hands were interlocked and wedged between the knees to conceal their trembling. He controlled the wrath that blazed within him by a great effort of will, then he slowly rose, walked to the door and flung it open with a jerk.

"Go!" the old man shouted in a choking voice. Big, bristling with anger, he made a forbidding figure. "And don't you ever dare to set foot in my house again!"

Grubsky leapt to his feet.

"Kuzma Kuzmich, what's the matter with you?" he cried in a startled voice.

"Get out!" the old man bellowed, in a voice of thunder. "Don't drive me to an extremity, unless you want to be carried out of here in parts."

The former chief engineer flinched, drew his head into his shoulders and walked past the old man without glancing at him.

"And remember this, ex-friend—your silver friendship with engineer Topolev is at an end!" Kuzma Kuzmich roared after him. "I'm no party to your dirty intrigues and domestic conspiracies. Forget my address!"

He slammed the door to with a crash behind the guest and stumped up and down the room.

"The blackguard! Thought he found a confederate in me. Calls for active steps, does he?"

A sound of muffled voices could be heard outside the door. Kuzma Kuzmich went up to the door.

"He's ill and upset over something," Marya Ivanovna was saying apologetically.

"He's daft and senile, that's what he is, fit only for glue and soap," Grubsky snarled.

"We'll see what Topolev's fit for yet!" the old man shouted, but the guest had already gone. Marya Ivanovna shut the street

door with a clang of bolts, and the house, disturbed by the sudden visit, sank into silence once more.

Topolev paced up and down the room with his hands behind his back, muttering under his breath. Gradually he calmed down and his face cleared. His eyes lighted on the bottle of wine that Grubsky had brought. Kuzma Kuzmich picked up the bottle and burst out laughing. His wrath dissolved, and he had a sense of having accomplished a painful but necessary operation.

"I do believe this calls for a drink." Kuzma Kuzmich chuckled. He poured himself out a glass of wine, drank it, and carefully wiped his moustache. "Not a bad medicine, it will do the patient good."

He stood for a long time afterwards staring at the dark, snowed-up window. Then he sat down at the writing desk and busied himself till daybreak writing out calculations and memoranda relative to his proposal for digging the trench in the strait by the method of explosions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A LITTLE HOUSE UNDER THE SNOW

THEIR STRENGTH was utterly spent in fighting the blizzard, and Beridze ceased to believe that they stood any chance of surviving. Only the thought of Alexei, and sheer dogged fury kept him going and prevented him from relaxing his efforts. He stumbled on, lurching and falling, with Kovshov behind following him like a shadow.

Succour came unexpectedly in the shape of a man, who seemed to have been torn out of the impenetrable wall by a gust of wind. They did not see him until, a huge, wheezing, terrifying figure, he appeared close to Beridze. Alexei, suspecting evil intent, rushed to his comrade's defence. But the stranger showed no signs of hostile intentions. He was shouting something to Beridze, and Alexei saw that the man wished them well.

They walked on in single file—the stranger in front, with Beridze and Alexei following behind. The stranger suddenly stopped, spoke a few words to Beridze, then turned his skis left and disappeared. Beridze, his frozen beard pricking Alexei's cheek, shouted:

"We're in luck, Alexei! We've run into an old-timer, a fisherman, master of the blizzard. He heard the shots. He heard my shots, I say! That's what he says—heard them in this hellish noise. Promises to get us out."

"But he's disappeared, your master of the blizzard!"

"He hasn't, he's gone to look for a quieter way. He's looking for a calmer way, I say. The wind's blowing in layers. He's a walking wind-rose A wind-rose, I say!"

Alexei opened his mouth to ask how far it was to the fishing village, but the wind choked him and he could only gasp.

The fisherman reappeared at their side as suddenly as he had sprung up the first time. He passed the engineers and went in the opposite direction without stopping.

"He won't find that magic path!" Kovshov said sceptically

"Yes he will! He's probably cutting across the wind."

The fisherman actually found a path. Following him, the engineers rolled down a deep depression. Snowdrifts twice the height of man lay to the right and left of them. The blizzard raged overhead, but here the snow fell gently and the wind was fairly calm. The deep trench, formed by the movement of the blizzard, ran a zigzag course. The fisherman led them down it confidently, as though it were a well-trodden trail.

Soon the skiers ran into a campfire burning brightly at the bottom of the snow ditch. Several men silently moved aside to make way for the newcomers. Beridze and Kovshov, after warming their hands, got out their sleeping bags, crawled into them and moved close up to the fire.

"You've rescued us from a tight corner, my dear comrade. We shall never forget it!" Beridze said to the fisherman.

Alexei examined the faces of the men with interest. Grim and silent, they looked like old-world postillions in their huge heel-length sheepskin coats. The engineers' rescuer busied himself at the fire—he was apparently the leader. He squatted before the fire, wrapped up in his sheepskin coat, and gazed over it at Beridze. The stranger's face in the red

glow of the fire struck Alexei with its masculine beauty. The fisherman had piercing eyes, a fine straight nose and square jaw. He smiled broadly, as though they were sitting in a warm room instead of out in the frost.

"He's always saving someone. He even got a reward for it once," one of the men said mockingly, and the rest burst out laughing.

"That's a fact, my lad. It happened some five years ago, in weather like this. I found two frozen men on the Adun in winter. One was a bookkeeper, the other a cashier, I believe. I dragged 'em out one at a time on my back eight kilometres. And I got a reward for it—they suspected me of having bumped 'em off. Held me for two weeks, until they cleared the thing up. My pals still tease me about it."

The fisherman related the incident with imperturbable good humour. Alexei liked his voice which was of a deep mellow timbre of almost bass-like density. "He must have a good singing voice," Alexei thought. Beridze laughed so heartily at the fisherman's story that his beard, sticking out of the sleeping bag, fairly danced.

"It's lucky you found us alive, otherwise you'd be in trouble again," he said.

"Ever since then, it's got to be a sort of disease with me." The fisherman's eyes travelled over the company and his face grew grave. "I can't sit at home in bad weather. I'm always haunted by a feeling that there's some human soul perishing out on the Adun. It's hard to get out of such a fix, you know, unless you have experience! And would you believe my luck—not a year passes but I run into someone!"

"It was the same way this time," one of the men round the campfire said. "He sat listening, then jumped up. 'Shooting!' We tried to calm him, but he only got wild. 'Men are perishing out there, and we're sitting here doing nothing!...' Seems he was right again, doesn't it?"

Beridze, his strength restored, entered into a lively conversation with the fishermen. The latter readily confided their concerns to him. The catch had not been too good on the Lower Sazanka, where they came from, on account of the high water. But it was better now. They were on their way to attend a conference at the district centre, but the blizzard had held them up, and they would probably be late. Beridze lost no opportunity in enquiring about the extent of the flood tides on the Adun in

these parts. Then he told the fishermen about the construction of the pipe line and about its having been transferred to the left bank.

Enveloped in the pleasant warmth of his sleeping bag, Alexei imperceptibly dozed off under the hum of conversation. The voices reached him for a time, then seemed to melt in the waves of drowsiness that began to steal over him. He did not know whether an hour had passed or only several minutes, when Beridze's shout awakened him. Alexei could sleep in any noise, but if he were addressed he would wake up in an instant.

"Alexei, d'you know who our rescuer is?" Beridze cried excitedly sitting up. "Why, it's Karpov. The co-author of my left bank project! We've been talking all this time and only just found it out. No wonder I had a feeling all the time from his talk that this was an odd sort of fisherman. He's a builder, not a fisherman! My dear comrade, we have heard quite a lot of good things about you. Zalkind has been searching for you high and low and sent you a letter. You must come back with us to the construction, you simply must."

"I got the letter, and thank you for your kind words. Your chief Batmanov came down to Lower Sazanka the day before yesterday—

and he had a talk with me too. I'm much obliged for the honour. But I can't go to work on the construction, my lad, I can't. I'm responsible for the fishing kolkhoz."

Karpov said this with downcast eyes and in a bleak sort of tone. Alexei understood that this encounter had upset the man, already disturbed by Zalkind's letter and Batmanov's proposal. Karpov's companions did not like the turn the conversation had taken, and they raised a babble of protest:

"Don't you lure him away, Comrade Engineer, don't try to persuade him!"

"He's been down in the mouth as it is ever since he heard the construction had switched over to the new way."

"We in the kolkhoz are not twiddling our thumbs either. Our fish is needed for the front. Karpov's our chairman and the soul of the business. The people respect him. We can't do without him. If he leaves us we'll never forgive him."

The fishermen lapsed into an expectant silence. Beridze sat listening to the subsiding hum of the wind. He worked his hands free of the sleeping bag and began to crawl out.

"Come out into the daylight, Alexei, let's get a move on. The blizzard has died down.

The Nanai camp is only seven kilometres off, I've been told. We'll make it in no time."

"I shan't let you go, on no account," Karpov intervened firmly. "The wind will rise again very soon, and this time for long. If you get lost we'll be to blame."

"But I see you are striking camp yourself," Beridze said.

He rolled up his bag and began adjusting it on his back. Alexei, too, began making preparations to leave.

"Ah, but that's another matter, we're at home on the Adun."

"Surely you're not advising us to sit by the campfire a whole week? Our time is too precious."

"You don't have to sit by the campfire, my lad. I'll take you to a better place. There's a tractor of yours with a little house on sledge runners standing not far from here. You can wait there until the blizzard blows over."

Taking leave of the fishermen, the engineers set out in the direction of the river, with Karpov, moving swiftly on skis, in the lead.

Karpov brought the engineers to the "snail." How he found this tiny house—a mere speck amid the snowy ocean—was a mystery

to them. The tractor and its trailer hut were completely snowed under. Someone—the tractor driver probably—could be heard pottering around, trying to shovel away the snow.

"Hi, who's that?" Alexei heard a loud and familiar voice.

"Friends," Karpov answered. "I've brought you some guests."

They entered the "snail" by way of the snow trench, as through a subway. The little cubbyhole contained two sleeping bunks one above the other, a carpenter's bench, a little table, two stools and a tool box Coal and firewood lay heaped up in all the corners. The place could at a pinch accommodate two persons, and now the four of them squeezed in.

An oil lamp hung over the bench. After the darkness outside its smoking tongue of flame was almost dazzling In the middle of the hut a round little iron stove burned red-hot. A cry of pleasure escaped Beridze at the sight of the stove and the light. He edged his way towards the bunk and began swiftly throwing off his knapsack, sheepskin coat, hat and *valenki*.

"Follow my example," he advised Alexei.

The tractor driver, recovering from the first shock of surprise at the unexpected visit,

rushed to help his guests remove their things and make themselves comfortable.

"Don't you recognize me, Comrade Kovshov?" he asked Alexei. "I'm Silin, don't you remember, you and Filimonov saw me off at the Start? I got stuck here, didn't reach the strait. First I had a breakdown, then on top of it this here blizzard! I was going fine until it came. I dragged the trailers with the load out safely, helped the trucks out of tight corners and cleared the road. I hoped to make the strait soon, and here I am, stranded, can't move forwards or backwards."

"It's not easy to recognize you. The Silin I sent off was a young man, not an old beaver with red whiskers," Alexei said humourously. "Your voice is the only thing that hasn't changed. You look like a pirate."

Silin had in fact grown thick reddish sidewhiskers which made him resemble a Scandinavian seaman. Like Smorchkov, Silin had undertaken a very arduous task, and Alexei now gazed with respectful admiration at this tractor driver, who had succeeded in making such progress in his journey to the strait.

"I sent my mate down to Shmelev's base to get the old boy to help us out of the snow-

drifts. I gave him a hand recently—spent two days clearing the road for him down to the base. It's his turn now to give me a hand.... I'm a bit worried about my man, though—hope he doesn't lose his way," Silin complained, glad of the chance to have someone to talk to.

"You shouldn't have sent your mate out in this weather, my lad. The blizzard will start again, and your comrade may perish in it," Karpov said reprovingly. He stood with his back barring the door and surveyed the tractor driver's dwelling with lively interest. "And it's no use your shovelling the snow now. Just a waste of labour! Have a little patience, sit and wait for the gale to blow over, then you can dig yourself out. Watch the door doesn't get snowed up, that's all."

Silin made no answer to the fisherman's advice, and eyed him with an unfriendly look. Beridze, minus his overcoat, sat on a stool before the stove rummaging in his bag for eatables.

"Don't you look at him so suspiciously," he told Silin. "If it hadn't been for this comrade, Kovshov and I would be suffering torments now in paradise. You better give him a seat of

honour and treat him to something. Would you like some hot tea, Karpov? We'll fix it up directly!"

"I'm no great lover of tea. Besides, I haven't the time, my men are waiting for me. Haven't you anything colder than tea, comrade engineer?" Karpov asked.

"Hotter, you mean!" said Beridze. "Certainly, my dear man. That's just the blend of tea I had in mind."

He pulled a big flask of raw spirits from the knapsack. The sight of it was cheering and produced a grin on all faces, not excluding that of Alexei, who stood rubbing his frostbitten cheeks.

Karpov took off his hat, smoothed down his sleek black hair and carefully took the little silver cup from Beridze's hand. He tipped the liquor into his mouth and exhaled strongly, refusing the offer of a bite to take the edge off the spirits.

"My mitten'll do the trick," he said, wiping his lips with his mitten, then added: "Warms you up quicker that way!"

He put on his hat again, but did not depart. He was obviously loath to give up the warm comfort of the "snail" for the snowstorm outside.

"So what is the decision, Karpov? When shall we expect you?" Beridze asked gravely, his eyes intent on the fisherman's energetic face.

Karpov turned away.

"It's not so simple for me to leave, my lad," he said after a pause. "I can't just get up and go. I'd have been at the front a long time ago if it was that simple."

"We'll arrange all that, you needn't worry. We'll give the kolkhoz another man, if it comes to that. Zalkind will take care of everything," Beridze tempted him. He had taken a great liking to the man.

"It's not so simple, I tell you." Karpov faced Beridze, and there was a reproachful note in his voice. "My life's strongly linked with the kolkhoz, I've struck deep roots. Then there's my family—wife, two little girls, and my old father. The kolkhoz is short of men and the plan is a big one. The folks are attached to me, they won't forgive me if I leave them—nor will my family. Did you hear how my mates began to kick the moment you brought this up?"

Alexei felt sorry for the man, and he decided to distract Beridze's attention. The latter, however, was himself aware how painful this

conversation was to the fisherman, and he lapsed into silence. Karpov shook hands, made them a low bow and went away.

Silin was generously stoking the stove up with coal. An appetizing smell of stewed meat came from the canned food set out on the stove.

"Come on, move closer!" Beridze cried cheerily.

He seemed to have forgotten Karpov, and treated Kovshov and Silin to a hastily prepared supper. They drank a small portion of the raw spirits each—only Alexei was some time screwing up his courage to swallow the fiery liquid. They dined off warmed canned meat and some fried fish which Silin's mate had caught in an ice hole just before the blizzard started.

"What d'you keep looking at the door for, Alexei Nikolayevich?" Beridze asked, noticing that Kovshov paused frequently in his meal.

"I can't get Karpov out of my head," Alexei said reluctantly. "Here we meet a good man who's done us a great service—perhaps the biggest service a man can render a comrade in distress. He snatched us from the jaws of death, you might say. And the next minute he's gone as if nothing had happened, gone

goodness knows where. For all we know, we may never meet him again. And we forget about him the minute he has gone."

"Who said we've forgotten him? You take it from me, he'll come to work on the construction," Beridze said, interpreting Alexei's words in his own way.

"The folks here are always ready to lend a hand," said Silin, following Beridze's train of thought. "And it could hardly be otherwise. If you don't pitch in and help your comrades you can't expect anyone to help you. There aren't such a lot of people in these parts, and the climate's pretty grim. That fisherman did what he had to do and went his way. It's all in the day's work for him. He knows that if he should find himself in the same fix his comrades won't fail him. Take me, I also know that Shmelev would never refuse me help if I asked for it." The tractor driver grew excited again. "Remember what you said to me in Novinsk, Comrade Kovshov: 'If you reach the strait you'll be setting a new record. No tractor has ever covered such a distance in winter and without any roads besides.' I very nearly had a fit when I got stuck here, first owing to the breakdown and then this darn storm. There goes your record, I said to

myself. But you needn't worry, I'll make the strait yet!"

"I have no doubt of that," said Alexei.

"Tuck in, friends, tuck in," Beridze urged them. He had a piece of meat stuck on the end of the fork and his jaws were working vigorously.

After supper the engineers lay down to rest, Beridze on the lower bunk, Alexei above him. Silin was doing something at the bench and questioning the chief engineer about news from the front. The news was anything but heartening, and Silin drew a painful sigh, a sort of gasp, without attempt at concealment.

"So long as you're hard at work, it's all right," he said. "But as soon as you take a breather, you begin to feel bad—pricks of conscience: 'You're a son of a gun to be sitting here while the Germans are trying to smash through to Moscow.' All my relatives have joined the army. I worked in a lumber camp before I came here—transporting timber by tractor. One day I was summoned to headquarters. I was all excited—thought it was an answer to my application to be sent to the front, felt sure I'd be exchanging my tractor for a tank at last. But they decided to send me out here. My wife's a tractor

driver, too, she's still at the lumber camp. I want to ask your advice, Comrade Beridze. I've already spoken to Alexei Nikolayevich about it. I've got an idea that doesn't give me any peace."

Kovshov, languorous with the heat, lay on the upper bunk. His face, lashed by the winds and snows, was burning, and his eyes smarted, but he did not feel like sleeping. The blizzard howled in different voices over the ramshackle hut, as though two enormous beasts lay nearby locked in mortal combat with their fangs in each other's throat. Silin spoke agitatedly. He and his wife had some savings—they were both young and childless—and he had made up his mind to buy a tank and go to the front in it together with his wife. This probably could not be arranged here. What if he wrote to Comrade Stalin?

"My advice is this," Beridze said, and Alexei guessed by the warmth and earnestness of his tone that he was surprised and touched by what Silin had told him. "There's no need to leave the construction job. Buy a tank by all means. It's a noble idea, as anyone will tell you."

Beridze fell silent and lighted his pipe, which emitted a sizzling sound.

"I don't know what's the best way," Silin sighed.

"I'm telling you this as a comrade, not as chief engineer who's interested in keeping a good tractor driver. Say Comrade Stalin tells you that your decision is wrong, that you're needed to help with the building of the pipe line. You don't doubt, do you, that this construction is a fighting job, and every builder on it is a soldier?..."

Alexei, as he listened to the conversation, was sunk in his own thoughts. He had always, ever since childhood, been fond of discovering new places and new people. It had started with school lessons on geography and books of travel. His conception of unseen places had then been of a speculative, imaginary character. He had always found it hard to visualize the people who lived far away, on the Volga, say, or on the Adun, and followed pursuits of their own. Then he had visited the Volga, and now the Adun, and he saw these new places with his own eyes, saw for himself that here, too, people lived. He had not, of course, expected to find these places unpeopled. But he found confirmation of what his mind had

earlier conceived, and that brought a sense of satisfaction. Henceforth the picture that lived in his memory was full of colour and sound, now he knew the people who lived there and what they were doing. The chance encounter with the fisherman had left a deep trace in his soul, a warming sense of comradeship. Now Alexei knew that there lived and worked on the Adun a strong, brave man by the name of Ivan Lukich Karpov.... And a member of the Komsomol by the name of Makhov.... And now this tractor driver with his perambulating little home....

Covering up his inflamed eyes, Alexei reviewed the impressions of the last few days. The Adun—that great Russian river—presented itself now to him in vivid tangible scenes. It was peopled by a multitude of individuals, each with his own face, figure, voice and faculties. It was now easy to imagine both the Adun's past and its not too distant future, if only that which had a direct bearing on the pipe line. After having visited Rogov's section he could clearly picture, as Beridze had, the innumerable lights of the construction job on both banks of the river.

Silin, fretting with nothing to do, took a shovel and went out to clear the snow from

the door. Beridze lay on his back with his hands behind his head and his face turned up so that his beard stood up on end.

"We stand on firm ground now, Alexei, you and I," he said with satisfaction. "We have the people's support for our left bank scheme. The workmen at the sections, the fisherman Karpov and the Nanais—they're all for us. Did you hear what Silin said: 'You won't be able to shift the line back again, not for anything in the world—it's struck root on this bank....' You and I have thoroughly convinced ourselves that the main objection of our opponents concerning the left bank being subject to floods is exaggerated. Because of the flood scare they arrived at a false premise in their prospecting and their project, and then they got so used to the error that they came to regard it as an immutable law. Once in ten years or so Sections Seven and Eight may be flooded, but that needn't frighten us."

He expounded his ideas concerning the flaws in the old project and the advantages of the new one.

"I see you've got your speech down pat for the conference at Rubezhansk," Alexei said with a laugh.

"Yes, I have! The big chiefs may tell us off for our arbitrary action, but they can't deny that we're in the right! We, Soviet engineers, have been taught not to be afraid to take risks. We have taken a risk and are prepared to answer for it. Right, Alexei?"

"Quite right," Alexei answered after a pause. "We must get back to Novinsk as quickly as possible and finish the project. We must get away from the town, out onto the works' sections.... D'you know, Georgi, my heart aches when I think of the strait and the island. We haven't been out there once yet!"

"I wonder whether Batmanov has been out at the strait? It would be a good thing if he has!" Beridze said with a sigh. "Apparently he's sending out only Pankov for the time being."

They tried to figure out where the construction chief was now. They had their last news of him from Tanya Vasilchenko. Batmanov was two days ahead of them.

"It's hard on poor Tanya!" Beridze said suddenly, and began tossing about on the bunk until the wooden beam creaked. "We shouldn't have left her, our help would have come in useful to her."

"She's not a namby-pamby miss. And she isn't alone out there—she has the collective,"

Alexei retorted. "The blizzard here is not a rarity, and she can't always be depending on outside protection."

"I'm sure that Tatyana is not sitting back and waiting, but is doing her hardest to maintain the connection. You just think of the conditions she's working under—the blizzard tears off the wire, she fixes it up again, the blizzard knocks down trees, but still she hangs on.... I only hope nobody gets hurt!"

Before Beridze had finished speaking there was a commotion outside and the little house shook. Silin's voice was heard shouting excitedly.

"Something's happened!" said Georgi Davydovich and hastily pulled on his *valenki*.

The door burst open and through the cloud of steam they saw Silin and Karpov carrying the motionless figure of a man between them.

"Now, who've you brought in this time?" the tractor driver grumbled. Nevertheless he held his new guest tenderly as he looked about him for somewhere to lay him down. "There isn't any room in here for a pin to drop. It's a tight squeeze for the three of us, and you bring me another lodger. Who asked you to drag him here?"



"There isn't any other place, lad. You're the only inhabited point in these parts. It's a hike of several kilometres to your section, and Sazanka is still further. And you wouldn't want to leave him out there, would you, lad? It's a human being, after all. I heard him shouting. But by the time I got to him he couldn't shout any more, poor thing."

Alexei swiftly spread a sheepskin jacket and some other soft clothing on the floor and they laid down their burden.

"Look, he covered his face with his hands and froze in that position," Beridze whispered.

Silin bent over the frozen man, unclasped the hands and recoiled in horror.

"Good God, it's Fyodor!"

The tractor driver recognized his mate whom he had sent to Shmelev. Silin lost his head and began shaking his frozen comrade stupidly by the arm and wailing: "Fyodor! Fedya! What happened to you? Speak to me, Parshin, Fedya!"

"Just a minute there!" said Alexei and pushing him aside, bent down close to the frozen man's face.

Beridze, Karpov and Silin stood in a huddle over him staring anxiously at Parshin's white face.

"He's alive!" Alexei said with relief as he got up. "Karpov, get some snow, quick! Silin, help me undress him! Georgi, open the stove door and get a good blaze going as quickly as you can!"

After half an hour's rubbing with snow and spirits Parshin regained consciousness. They wrapped him, now burning all over, in three sheepskin coats and moved him close up to the stove. Silin, weeping with joy, fussed over him as if he were a baby. With clumsy tenderness he held a mug of hot tea to his lips and tried to feed him, assuring him heartily that everything would be all right.

"Semyon Ilyich," Parshin said at last in a weak voice. "Shmelev promised to get spare parts for us and send them over. He says he'll do everything he can to help. . . ."

After a while he fell asleep and the "snail-dwellers" calmed down. Karpov prepared to take his leave, but this time Silin detained him.

"What's your hurry. Wait here till the blizzard stops. There's room for all of us. It'll be crowded but snug, as they say. I haven't thanked you yet. I'll never forget this as long as I live. You saved my comrade's life. . . . I thank you, too, Alexei Nikolayevich, for bringing him back to life. . . ."

"You're talking nonsense, my lad," said Karpov kindly. "He's our comrade as much as yours. Now, I'll be wishing you goodnight. I don't think I'll bother you any more this time."

He wrapped his long sheepskin coat around him, bowed and went out into the blizzard. Silin sat for a while beside his sleeping mate and then lay down next to him. Soon silence fell over the little house under the snow and all that was heard was the uneven breathing of the rescued tractor driver, Silin's faint snore and the howling and whining of the blizzard above the roof.

Beridze could not fall asleep. He got up after a while to adjust the wick and put some more coals in the stove, and noticed that Kovshov was not sleeping either. He lay on his back holding a letter before him, his eyes staring out over the sheets of paper, and his tightly compressed lips were expressive of such anguish that Beridze was startled.

"Is anything the matter, Alexei? Come, tell me, I'm your friend, aren't I!"

Alexei looked at him long, then silently handed him the letter. It was from Moscow,

from Zina's mother. Beridze went back to his bunk to read it. The old woman, in her anxiety over her daughter, confided her fears to the man who, she knew, loved Zina as passionately as he was loved by her.

"... Her friends who have remained in Moscow come to see me sometimes. I receive letters from the girls who have evacuated. Sometimes an evil jealous feeling rises up in me for a moment—my Zina, too, might have been here, or somewhere safe in the rear. But really I do not wish any other destiny for Zina. She has chosen her destiny herself. I need not tell you what a proud brave girl she is. She could not be other than she is, and I do not wish it. If only she remains alive, my darling!

"I want to tell you about a quarrel I had with her just before she went out there. It happened after a particularly harrowing night. It was a week since you had departed. She came home from night duty, soon after the air raid was over. I had been upset all night and my nerves were in rags, and I gave her a piece of my mind. I said she was tempting Providence—you know, she never took cover in the bomb shelter even when she slept at home. 'I refuse to hide in a cellar and shiver there like a mangy dog,' she answered. 'It's too great

an honour to the Fritzes for me to start crawling into cellars because of them.'

"I continued to upbraid her. 'If you wished to, you could have gone with your institute to the rear and be safe from bombings. It isn't too late even now, you can plead illness or something else.' She flew into a temper, our beautiful darling! 'Stop it!' she cried. 'I'm ashamed of you, teaching me cowardice. Alexei is at the front, and you expect me to try and save my skin.' Then, after some hesitation, she said: 'The order has been issued—I signed for it—and tomorrow morning I'm leaving for the front. I'll tell you honestly—I arranged it myself through the district committee.' I understood her then and I gave her my blessing....

"Alexei, my dear boy, there is so much I would like to tell you. I wish I could say something that would gladden you, make you happy, but where can one find such words these days? Perhaps I have told you all this about Zina before. If so, please excuse me—I keep on reliving it over and over again. She asked me to tell you to think of her—she'll feel better if you do. And she will always think of you, always! She said: 'Tell him—it is my

belief that the best years of our love lie ahead of us. . . .' "

The letter upset Beridze. He pressed the rumpled sheets to his face and muttered through clenched teeth:

"They shall pay in full for all the anguish of our loved ones . . . for all their tears and suffering. . . ."

He lay for a long time thinking of Alexei and Zina, and of the sunshine of their love that appeared to him suddenly here amid the night and the snows. The thought of Zina, whom he had seen only on a photograph, evoked memories of Tanya, and his heart swelled with pride for the girl who, like Zina, had been able to find within herself a well of strength and courage. He got up to tell Alexei about it, but the latter had succumbed at last to exhaustion and was already sound asleep, one arm hanging over the side of the bunk. Beridze raised the arm, smoothed the hair back from his face, straightened the padded jacket that had slipped out of place, and stood for several minutes gazing at his sleeping comrade.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LIFE'S RHYTHM

KUZMA Kuzmich Topolev, like most old people, awoke early, and observed the signs of awakening life around him. Somewhere a cock crowed. From behind the partition came the babble of a child—the landlady's four-year-old orphaned grandchild, recently brought away from the distant and much-suffering Ukraine. The factory whistles in town began hooting, and their voices steadily merged into a wave of powerful sound that set the windowpanes rattling. The rime-embroidered squares of the windows gradually grew brighter, changing from dark blue to mauve, then to pale blue and pink. The familiar objects in the room began to stand out in the semi-gloom of morning twilight.

The newly born day is always lovely. If it is sunny, all around is radiant; if it is rainy,

there is a peculiar freshness and cleanliness in the air. In the summertime it smells of flowers, honey, hay and milk; in the winter the frost playfully pinches cheeks and noses. The bright awakening of nature in the dawn of a new day is an invariable source of delight to a healthy person.

Kuzma Kuzmich loved these sweet minutes of early morning. He liked them also because they were so unlike the rest of the day with its crowds and hubbub, its cares and worries. In these moments he did not wish to think of anything, and his mind was serene and at peace. He daily made the passage from this state of serenity to the noisy hours of work with a feeling akin to bewilderment.

At one time Kuzma Kuzmich, following the example of his nephew Volodya, did setting-up exercises of a morning in secret, so that "your body and your soul may stay forever young," as the song goes. He had watched Volodya doing his physical jerks and had learned to repeat them quite nimbly; hands on hips, he squatted and straightened up, made now sharp now smooth movements with his arms, went through the gestures of running and boxing with an invisible opponent. Panting from the effort and feeling the blood

racing through his veins, Kuzma Kuzmich paced up and down the room murmuring Volodya's favourite Mayakovsky verse "Here I am, handsome and twenty-two."

He no longer went in for gymnastics, probably since the day he parted with Volodya. His nephew, after graduating from the Military Academy, went to serve on the Western frontier, and he, now a lonely man, had come to the Far East. Ever since then something had seemed to have snapped in Topolev. His nephew must have acted as that stimulant which every man who has entered upon the cheerless period of old age finds so essential. Volodya had gone, and his place beside Topolev was taken by Grubsky, a callous creature, revoltingly smug and complacent, with a metaphysical cast of mind.

Today Kuzma Kuzmich felt indifferent to everything. It was a fine morning outside, but the old man had no desire to look out of the window to convince himself of it. The stillness of the room and inaction began to pall on him, this domestic tranquillity irked him. His soul was satiated too with the cloying sweetness of these halcyon morning minutes. What he needed now was work with its noise and excitement, work with restless men like

Alexei Kovshov, Beridze, Batmanov. Instead of which he was basking in cosy indolence and nursing himself with powders.

Kuzma Kuzmich rose puffing and groaning from his bed. His eye lighted on the folder containing his memorandum proposing the method of explosion for digging the trench through the strait. He had finished it the day before yesterday, and rewritten it twice very painstakingly, like a schoolboy in love with his teacher. Now as he dressed he turned his face away from the folder. Probably there was nothing remarkable about his memorandum after all, and his teacher was right in being in no haste to look at it.

It was necessary to wash and shave, but he had no great desire to do either. Kuzma Kuzmich examined himself in the looking-glass ruefully. His face did not please him at all—he regarded it with disappointment, as one does a bad purchase upon bringing it home. His forehead was deeply furrowed—the traces of life's claws. Eyes faded, almost watery. Greenish yellow moustaches so saturated with snuff that nothing now could wash it off. Face gaunt, and at the same time flabby, formless and looking no younger even after a sleep or a shave.

"Yes. There's scant joy in old age," Topolev said to himself with a sigh.

He caught sight of Marya Ivanovna looking at him closely through the half-open door. Kuzma Kuzmich coldly wished her a good morning and turned away. Her solicitous attentions were the last thing he desired at that moment.

"Will you shave?" the landlady asked—she knew that it was his habit. "I'll bring you some hot water right away. And then breakfast. I've fried some fresh fish, and there's something else to it too. Some kind friend has sent a rich parcel."

The old man did not answer, although the mention of the parcel surprised him. Marya Ivanovna drew closer, scrutinized him and shook her head.

"Oh, you do look bad, Kuzma Kuzmich! You should keep to your bed until you get well. A messenger came with a letter from the head office first thing this morning. He brought the parcel too. I was glad of the parcel, but I didn't want to take the letter. 'Can't you let a man be ill in peace?' I said."

She did not expect her words to have such an effect on her lodger. He brightened up at once, jumped to his feet and ran over to her.

"A letter, eh? Why didn't you say so before? Where is it? Who's it from?"

Marya Ivanovna rummaged about in the pockets of her jumper and brought out an envelope folded in two. It was a note from Zalkind:

"How do you do, Kuzma Kuzmich. I am reporting to you, as arranged—Alexei and Beridze have come back safe and sound. Batmanov is home, too, he came by plane a day earlier. How are you feeling? Unless you are quite well you had better stay indoors and I shall send Alexei to you in the evening. Hurry up and get well, Kuzma Kuzmich. Do you need anything? Do not hesitate to say so. Respectfully yours, Zalkind."

Kuzma Kuzmich began pottering and fussing about the room, although he could not have said where he was hurrying to or why he was in such haste.

"I like that—she isn't glad of the letter! Who's the letter addressed to anyway?" he grumbled. "Hot water, Marya Ivanovna, quickly please!"

The landlady regarded the old man's sudden flurry and bustle with some alarm at first, but then she smiled.

"I'll fetch the water. But you're not going to the head office, are you? I shan't let you! Olga Fyodorovna ordered you to lie in bed."

"I want the hot water! And make haste!" Topolev cried gaily. "What's Olga Fyodorovna? There are bigger doctors than she...."

He shaved in three minutes, washed without his usual dawdling, and refreshened his face with eau de Cologne. He chuckled upon noticing that his face had grown younger after all. He waved away the lavish breakfast of fried fish, butter and coffee, and ran down the porch steps with a youthful skip, leaving Marya Ivanovna speechless with amazement. And now he saw that the morning was truly magnificent! Nature was at peace once more after the wild blizzard. The streets were carpeted in smooth white snow. The rimy branches of the trees, glowing under the sun's rays, seemed made of delicate porcelain. Straight pillars of white smoke stood above the roofs of the houses and did not seem to stir.

The old man strode buoyantly down the street, knee-deep in the heavy snowdrifts, and greedily inhaled the fresh air which smelt of watermelons.

Kovshov and Beridze had returned late the night before. They had made the return journey by plane and were chilled to the marrow. The engineers went straight to the head office where their appearance created a sensation. The whole place was in an uproar. One would think that people had been sitting up waiting for them. The man on night duty, ignoring Beridze's mild protests, rang up Batmanov at his home. The construction chief had given orders to phone him immediately Beridze and Kovshov turned up....

"Hullo, you lost wanderers!" his voice, hoarse from sleep but obviously pleased, drew a smile from Beridze. "I was thinking of equipping a search party. Sent out telegrams and phoned in all directions. So nothing's happened? Are you quite well?"

"Quite well, Vasili Maximovich."

"Go to bed now. But don't oversleep. I shan't let you rest long. The work has been piling up."

"We shan't rest long, we're not particularly tired," Beridze said, although his eyes were sticky with sleep and his head nodded drowsily.

He invited Alexei to spend the night with him.

"It's warm at Serafima's place and everything's conveniently at hand. We'll have a quick wash and some supper. We'll manage to get three or four hours' sleep. It's good for a man to stay in the warmth a bit. My very soul's shivering, I'm that frozen. We'll tackle the report after we've had a rest, and then go to Batmanov fully armed."

Alexei demurred, he was impatient to get back to his own room and find out whether there had been any letters or telegrams from Moscow. They parted, having arranged to meet at 9 a.m. sharp.

As he walked down the corridor past his department Kovshov noticed a bright light burning in the draughtsmen's room. Kobzev, Petya Gudkin and several other men were working in utter silence in various corners of the huge room. Petya was working out some calculations and his lips moved soundlessly. He looked up absent-mindedly and saw Kovshov standing in the doorway. The young technician started, then sprang up with a yell of joy. Everybody crowded round Kovshov, overjoyed. Kobzev promptly began reporting to him on business matters, while Kovshov, deeply moved by the hearty welcome and

the fact that he found them all at work, gazed affectionately at each in turn.

"All I can tell you just now, my friends, is this—let's get some sleep," he said, trying to conceal his emotion. "We'll talk about everything in the daytime. How did you manage here without me, son?" Kovshov asked Petya, who could not tear his eyes from his beloved chief's face.

"Oh, that's a story in itself, Alexei Nikolayevich!" Kobzev said.

Another surprise awaited Alexei at home. He found to his chagrin that he had nowhere to lay his head. While he was away his room had been turned into a communal kitchen, complete with a cooking range and sundry utensils. A janitor who came out of his cubbyhole at the noise, found Kovshov standing nonplussed in the corridor. Alexei had never seen him before.

"What do you want, citizen?" the janitor asked gruffly.

"Are you the janitor?"

"I'm his assistant."

"What's the idea of this, comrade assistant janitor? I had a room when I went away, and I come back to find my room gone, turned into a kitchen."

"Ah, so you're the missing tenant? Well, you haven't lost anything, it wasn't much of a room anyway! A new room's been prepared for you—the chiefs were looking over it today—Comrade Zalkind and some other man. They liked it. Here's the key, you can take possession. Better show me your documents first, I must make sure you're the right man."

"Was there any mail for me, any letters or telegrams?"

"Not that I know of. Nothing was turned over to me. That means there weren't any."

Alexei unlocked the door and fumbled for the switch. He turned on the light and stood motionless in the doorway, his eye travelling from object to object. The room was a large one, newly decorated, and doubtlessly warm. On the floor lay a thick carpet, slightly worn but still in good condition. A round table in the middle of the room was covered with an elegant golden yellow cloth, and over the table hung a chandelier. A wooden bedstead, shining with new varnish, was covered with a good woollen blanket. By the window stood a writing table and an armchair. A bookstand stood in a corner with his own books set out on the shelves—someone had taken them out of his

trunk, where they had lain since the day he arrived. On the walls hung small portraits of Stalin and Gorky—Alexei remembered having seen those portraits somewhere. There were flowers too, on little stands placed at either side of the desk.

Only the books here belonged to him. Where had all the rest come from? Continuing his inspection, he saw some other things that belonged to him—Zina's portrait on the table, and next to it a large photograph of his family. The unknown person who had arranged this room had not had any qualms about disposing his things. However, it occurred to him as soon as he entered the room that his new dwelling with all these tokens of friendly solicitude and care was the work of Zalkind and Zhenya, chiefly Zhenya. He turned round to the door just as Zhenya came running in, wrapped in a fluffy shawl and flushed with sleep.

"At last you've come!" she cried with a sigh of relief. "How I worried and waited! We all did."

"Thanks, Zhenya.... Thanks..." Alexei whispered, and his throat suddenly contracted. He held her hands in his own, swollen with the frost.

"I hear, I hear! He's come, raising a shindy and not letting anyone sleep!" the voice of Grechkin resounded through the corridor, and its owner came bursting into the room half-dressed and sleepy-eyed. "Look at the posh apartment they've fixed up for you! You have Zhenya to thank for that, her and Zalkind's wife—and my own missus Lizochka had a hand in it too.... Come along, come to our room, and put away that frown," said Grechkin.

He put his arm round Alexei and dragged him to his own rooms. Kovshov submissively entered the planning chief's apartment which shone with the cleanliness of polished floors, curtains and tablecloths. Zhenya, with some hesitation, came in too.

"Lizochka, act the hostess to Alexei Nikolayevich, there's a dear," Grechkin said in a pleading voice. "Put on some hot water and make something nice for supper."

"Don't you try to boss me, you're not in the planning department. I know what to do without you telling me," retorted Lizochka, already busy at the electric cooker.

They sat down to the table as soon as Alexei had finished a hasty wash behind the screen. Lizochka obviously resented Zhenya's presence

but she softened when she saw that the girl had eyes for Alexei only. Grechkin, overjoyed at seeing his comrade and at the warm welcome Lizochka had given him, hastened to impart all the head office news. He related with a touch of humour Petya Gudkin's attack on Kuzma Kuzmich, the reconciliation between Liberman and Fedosov, and the "women's revolution" as a result of which a "women's government" had been formed under the presidency of Zalkind's wife, with his Lizochka as one of the ministers. The chief role in Grechkin's story, however, was played by Zhenya.

"I'm blest if I can understand where she suddenly got it all from!" the planning chief said. "She had plenty of energy before, but it was all for dancing to exhaustion and singing herself hoarse. And now she's become a public figure—simply knocks the spots out of Tanya!... Now's the time for her to get married." Grechkin made the unexpected conclusion. "Haven't you a suitable bridegroom in view, Alexei Nikolayevich?" He looked quizzically from the girl to Alexei.

"Don't be in such a hurry, not everything at once," Alexei answered with a laugh, battling with the waves of fatigue that swept over him.

Zhenya, who had so far put up with Grechkin's eulogies, got angry.

"That'll do! I'll find myself a husband without your help!"

"But it's not for your sake I'm worrying, it's for my own," Grechkin said. "Lizochka will nag me less when she sees you safely married at last."

It was now Lizochka's turn to get angry.

"Can't you ever ride past my yard without getting your shafts caught in the gate?" she jibed.

It was about five in the morning when at last suddenly it dawned on them that Alexei was tired and needed a rest.

Alexei and Zhenya left the Grechkins together and stopped outside in the corridor. They were both reluctant to part so soon. Alexei wished to say something nice to Zhenya, some heartfelt words. He could feel that she was waiting to hear those words.

"People are rarely able to say kind things to each other. And I'm just like other people in this respect."

He fell silent as it was suddenly borne in on him that Zhenya loved him. During his fortnight's absence her infatuation had blossomed out into a deep and genuine love, the

first grand passion of her life. She stood now facing him with yearning in her eyes and waited for him to take her in his arms, and silently press his cheek to hers. He was thrown into confusion at the flood of feeling that nearly mastered him.

The girl little suspected what a tumult of soul Alexei experienced in those few seconds before he regained control of himself. He was unable to respond to her feelings. He simply felt lonely, forlorn and cold, yearned for warmth, and Zhenya's kindness and solicitude had deeply stirred him.

"No, I mustn't!" he thought, sharply curbing himself. "I shall never forgive myself for it afterwards."

And because he yearned for warmth and was drawn to the girl, he said rather drily:

"It's good to hear such glowing reports about you. I'm glad, very glad. . . ."

"Thanks, Alexei . . . I owe so much to you," Zhenya said, suddenly wilting.

Alone in his room, Kovshov paced restlessly to and fro. He thought over his attitude towards Zhenya, and came to the conclusion that he had done right. Yet he was sorry for the girl—her pained face stood before his eyes.

Stumbling over the carpet, Alexei suddenly realized how terribly tired he was. His legs were giving way under him and the desire to sleep was overpowering. In an hour's time he would have to sit down to work. It was hardly worth while going to sleep. But the sight of the bed was so tempting that he could not restrain the impulse to lie down for a brief rest. He stretched out on the woolly blanket without undressing, and fell asleep in an instant. It must have been in sleep that his father's words, uttered long ago, came back to him: "There are many good people in the world, Alexei, very many. It is a pity we do not always notice them and do not always believe in them. But we should notice them and believe in them more. . . ."

He awoke with a start and peered at his watch with consternation. But he found that he had slept no more than an hour. Ten minutes later he was in his office, whistling to himself as he pondered over his part of the report. He had to give an account of everything he had seen and done on the construction line. The other half of the report containing their ultimate conclusions concerning the left-bank var-

iant of the pipe line was to be written by Beridze.

Kuzma Kuzmich found Alexei sitting before a small pile of closely written sheets of paper. While still in the doorway the old man threw a keen glance at his young chief sitting in his sheepskin coat, and noticed how haggard and grey his face was. His pen moved swiftly over the paper, and his face, with the cigarette held awkwardly in his mouth, wore an air of deep concentration. His hair hung in careless disorder over both sides of his forehead.

To Alexei Topolev's appearance was untimely. "What's brought him here so early, why couldn't he stay at home!" Alexei thought with annoyance. He noticed at once, however, that a curious change had come over the old man. Topolev was obviously agitated and came straight towards him. Alexei threw down his pen and hastily grasped the hand which the old man held out to him.

"Alexei," said Kuzma Kuzmich, and Kovshov was struck by the familiar form of address—he had never heard it nor expected to hear it from Topolev. "I must talk with you. I warn you, it's not a business talk, not official, but it's important to me, and perhaps to you too. I would ask you not to treat it scornfully

if you can. Office hours will commence in about an hour. The phone will start ringing and people will come bursting in with urgent questions. I shall then probably not want to say another unofficial word, and you won't want to listen to me. But talk we must. It's my fault that this ice has formed between us, and I must be the first to break it. . . ."

The old man fell silent for a second and looked questioningly at Kovshov. The latter stole an anxious glance at his unfinished report, then said gravely and earnestly:

"Go on, Kuzma Kuzmich, I'm listening to you. Why don't you sit down?"

"Alexei . . . a man I esteem for his intelligence recently reminded me of Lenin's word: '. . . defeat is not so dangerous as the fear to acknowledge one's defeat and draw from it all the necessary conclusions.' He had good reason for reminding me of this, and it was greatly to the point. I suffered a terrible defeat in life and did not realize it, did not acknowledge it. Now I have acknowledged my defeat and drawn a lesson from it. This is what I want to begin our talk with. But please don't be surprised at the oddness of this conversation, this sudden eccentricity of mine and the incoherence of my speech. . . ."

Alexei was really surprised, even taken aback at first by this passionate, confused outburst on the part of this taciturn old man. Kuzma Kuzmich began speaking hurriedly and disjointedly of how he had imperceptibly fallen under the domination of false, slavish conceptions of life, and now, upon receiving a powerful impulse from without, a revulsion had taken place in his mind. He spoke of Comrade Stalin's speeches on November 6 and 7, of the conference at Zalkind's and of Petya Gudkin's accusatory speech, of the death of General Mironov, of his nephew Volodya, of the friends of his childhood and the vow of youth taken in the little house overlooking the Dnieper, of the incredible flight of time and the loss of his sense of life's rhythm, of Mozart and Salieri, and of his patron Grubsky—the vehicle of the disgusting theory of smug philistinism called "loyalty" by some engineers of his own age. "Live and let live! That's what this tricky word really means!" the old man said indignantly. And the tangible result of that was his, Topolev's, apathetic, almost malevolent attitude towards the noble attempt to repudiate the old project of the pipe line and create a new one. "Yes, yes, I confess it, Salieri of Adun, the devil take me!"

Topolev drew breath and went off again at a tangent.

"Alexei," he continued, toying with a red handkerchief, "remember this—a man should always be discontented with himself. Never blame circumstances for your failures, blame yourself alone. Do not stop. Do not rest on your laurels, do not cool down, never let your heart grow old. Don't be tempted by the easily attainable, petty pleasures of life in preference to the bigger, less accessible joys. There are big and small perspectives in life. Never be satisfied with the small perspective."

The charwoman, a dour-faced old woman, with a pail and duster in her hand, glanced in at the door. She caught Alexei's eye, nodded her head in greeting and stepped in into the room with the intention of setting about her duties. Kovshov dismissed her with a wave of the hand. She stood irresolute for a minute, then disappeared. Then Filimonov put his head in at the door, and him too Alexei stopped at the threshold. Topolev went on speaking, standing in an unbuttoned overcoat with raised collar, in his hat and a big warm scarf wound round his neck. He saw no one and nothing except Alexei, and did not tear his eyes off his face.

"Life is short, it is long only for idle people. Take care of time! But don't imagine that I'm urging you to take care of yourself. God forbid—on the contrary! You shouldn't safeguard yourself against life. There's a saying that he has lived well who has hidden well. It's a frightful proverb, it doesn't suit us—neither me nor you. Let us leave it to Grubsky and his kind. Give yourself wholly to life, but do not abandon yourself to its current without volition. Be always purposeful. Weigh every minute from the standpoint of your usefulness to people."

He reflected for a minute, then plunged on still more hurriedly:

"But take care that so-called current work doesn't begin to overwhelm you. No, be above it always. Don't think that I'm teaching you to take a supercilious view of routine work and the minutiae. Oh no! What I mean is that work should always be a vocation. I don't repudiate routine work, on the contrary, I urge you to love the minor details of it as well. It is they that go to make up the sum of precious experience. I've been watching you at work, and I know that you are sometimes anxious to get things done quickly, in five minutes, and

are apt to neglect many details. Don't you see how wrong that is?"

The old man waved his hand with the red handkerchief clutched in it, and the gesture was like a signal of distress.

"Think carefully of what I have told you, Alexei. As a man taught by experience I have the right to warn you, and I do warn you. God forbid the thing should ever happen to you that once happened to me: losing for a time the sense of life's rhythm and being awakened suddenly by some strong impulse to find that you have squandered your time, your strength, mind and talent on the petty things of life.... Ah, my dear boy, how painful it is, how frightful, to sum up your life and find how much of it has been unforgivingly wasted in senseless futilities...."

Topolev shook his head vigorously and bitterly. His emotion communicated itself to Alexei. The latter's preoccupied face, tanned dark by exposure to the winter winds, cleared. Topolev suddenly lapsed into silence and lowered himself into an armchair. Having unburdened himself, he seemed to have suddenly awakened from a dream. He saw the handkerchief in his hand and hastily thrust it into his pocket. He took his hat off, unwound his scarf and

turned down the collar of his coat—he felt hot.

Alexei was silent. The old man looked up, and, following Kovshov's glance, turned his head towards the door. Grechkin, Zhenya, Petya Gudkin, Kobzev and Filimonov stood in the doorway, and the broad face of Liberman could be seen behind their backs. They could see that Kovshov and Topolev were engaged in earnest conversation, but could not understand why it could not be interrupted and why Alexei did not want them to come in.

Kovshov noticed that the old man's brows rose in annoyance, and he made a wry face, obviously regretting that he had let his tongue run loose.

"Well, I suppose we'll let it go at that. I'm afraid I have been wasting your time," he muttered.

"Excuse me, comrades," Alexei said to those standing in the doorway, "but I'm very busy with Kuzma Kuzmich and have no time just now. I'll see you all in half an hour's time."

They went away puzzled. Topolev sat with his face frozen in an expression of bitter amusement.

"Kuzma Kuzmich, my dear man," Alexei said softly, and the tone of his voice instantly

set the old man at ease. The young engineer stood in front of him with animated face, and the expression of his eyes alone told Topolev that he had not spoken in vain. "Believe me, all that you have said and the very fact that you have come to me to say it has touched me to the depths of my soul. You have been frank, and so I'll be frank with you too." Alexei puffed at his cigarette which had long gone out, and he vainly tortured it between his lips. "It would be hard to find a man these days who is calm and self-contented. I tell you more, I would cease to trust a man if I saw him these days complacent and calm. For myself all these months have been filled with experiences that I never knew before. I was at the front, you know, and smelt powder, then suddenly found myself here, of all places! I wanted to get back into the ranks, and how difficult it was to fight down that impulse and see things in their proper light."

Alexei at last threw away the extinguished cigarette. His eye came to rest on the draft of his unfinished report. He pushed the sheets away from him with a brusque gesture.

"I doubt whether I'll be able to gladden you with anything in the way of a revelation," he said with a laugh, disconcerted by the old

man's strained, expectant silence. "I see the thing this way—we've both got to get this off our chest after so long a silence. It will be easier for us to work after that." Alexei paused, and the old man gave an acquiescent nod. "I only want to say a word in your defence, against your own attacks. I don't know what happened to make you shut yourself up in your shell. But both I and Beridze and Zalkind and the other comrades understood that this was not the real Topolev we saw before us, but a substitute of him, a man, I should say, who wasn't in form. If you like to know, Petya Gudkin understood this too, otherwise he wouldn't have touched you. And we weren't mistaken. There is a difference between Topolev and Grubsky!..."

Alexei rubbed his eyes—sleepless nights were making themselves felt, and his eyes smarted painfully.

"Tell me, my dear Kuzma Kuzmich, what practical conclusions have you drawn for yourself? If one didn't appreciate your present state of mind one would be inclined to put it down to the disillusionment of a building engineer in his calling, after having given nearly forty years of his life to it. Why is that?"

Topolev sat up rigid in his chair.

"Don't let us talk about me. You won't make anything decent now out of a centenarian like me. I only want my deplorable experience to serve as a lesson for you, who are only just beginning life."

Alexei gave his head a stubborn shake, and a lock of hair escaped and hung down his forehead.

"Don't raise objections, Kuzma Kuzmich, and don't be angry because what I say will concern you only. Otherwise this conversation of ours will lead nowhere."

Someone looked in at the door again and instantly disappeared. Kovshov went up to the door and shut it. Kuzma Kuzmich followed his movements impatiently.

"We have established the main truth—that there is nothing more important for us than our duties towards our country. Labour for its sake is the gauge by which we measure every man. Very good then. You said time flies swiftly and our life is like an impetuous torrent. You're right. We need hardly go into the reasons why that is so. But if that is the case, then we must accept the impetuosity of our epoch without reserve. We must submit to it, accept it as a normal phenomenon."

A hum of voices sounded down the corridor. The staff had come to work.

Muza Filipovna came into the room, straightened the glasses on her nose and said good morning less effusively than she would have done had Topolev not been there. She was a bit afraid of the old man and disliked him.

"The chief engineer asked me to find out whether you were here, Alexei Nikolayevich. He's waiting for you at nine sharp."

Kovshov ruffled his hair and moved the sheets towards him. Kuzma Kuzmich rose.

"We'll have to put off this talk."

"No, we shan't put it off," Alexei demurred. "You set the right condition at the beginning—this conversation is the first and the last, and we must finish it before office hours begin."

Kuzma Kuzmich sat down again.

"You say you are gasping for breath, you can't keep the pace, you have squandered yourself on petty things, you haven't fulfilled the vow of your youth, have cooled off, and the inertia of movement has petered out. Is that true, Kuzma Kuzmich? It's very good that you're such a stern judge of yourself—it means that you aren't entirely inclined to rest on

your laurels and take things easy... But don't you think you are heaping wrongful accusations on yourself? We young engineers have always known Topolev as a big Soviet builder and regarded him as a model worthy of emulation. Has that Topolev died, or what? What's happened to him?" Alexei became aware that his vehement gestures were betraying his agitation, and he instantly thrust his hands into the pockets of his sheepskin coat. "I, too, took a vow of youth, perhaps no less touching and amusing. Do you know, I even drew a five-year plan of my own for studies, work and all kinds of achievements. Ten years have passed since then. During that time I have come to realize that many things do not shape themselves the way I thought they would. After all, that which we call the vow of youth is a sort of wonderful thesis. Life makes its own amendments to our schemes and theses. And a good thing it does! You can't squeeze life into a wooden frame like you would a school curriculum. The important thing is not to forget one's vow, one's special five-year plan, amid the complexities and vicissitudes of life!..."

Alexei spoke excitedly, and Topolev gazed with surprise and admiration at his face sud-

denly beautified by the fervour of his emotions.

"Let's get to the bottom of it—what is the difference between us? You said something about the new and the old men, about Mozart and Salieri and many other things. Let us not revert to the petty and antiquated subject about the old and new specialists, Kuzma Kuzmich. In my opinion the only difference between us is that of age and habits. In all other respects we are both equally masters of our lives. Habits, I should say, are a secondary matter. Now the age difference is a bit more serious—here you're at a disadvantage. Heart, muscles and stomach have had some wear and tear. On this point I can only sympathize with you." Alexei smiled kindly and merrily. Topolev passed his hand over his moustache and smiled too—his first smile in Kovshov's presence. 'Advanced age! Well, what of it, the same thing will face me in the long run as well. We are engineers, and who knows better than we do that nothing serves for ever. Is it worth while looking astonished when your heart starts acting queer and the doctor diagnoses arteriosclerosis? Old age, of course, is not a pleasant thing to think of. But is your advanced age a hindrance to you?

No, it isn't! It's not the man who has turned sixty who is old, but the man who is off colour at thirty. But you're not that kind of man! I can only too well picture you at moments when you are working under inspiration. Inspiration and experience, your experience—those same precious millions of petty details of which you spoke. . . ."

"Allow me, Alexei," the old man said, getting up and glancing in alarm at the door, from behind which there came a hum of voices.

"No I shan't! I have another question to put to you. . . . All that you said about our lack of experience and the need for being more self-exacting is quite right. Speak of that more often and more sharply. Every one of us young engineers will appreciate it and no one will take offence. But you must have grounds today for speaking to us like that—and that's where my question comes in. . . ."

The telephone rang, but Alexei took no notice of it, and looked at Topolev unsmiling, sternly and searchingly.

"What question do you want to ask, Alexei Nikolayevich?" the old man said, visibly agitated, and he half-rose in his seat.

"Yes, I have been wanting to ask it," Alexei said, stressing his words. "I want to know

this—what practical conclusion have you drawn for yourself as a result? What can we expect from you?"

Topolev walked round the table, and coming close up to Alexei, he put his hands on his shoulders

"My dear boy, I'm yearning for real work and I want to make up for lost time. I think I have already found my way out of the blind alley. Heap as much work on me as you can, so that I bend under the weight of it. Help me to get back into the rhythm of life."

These words delighted Alexei, although he had expected them. He wrung the old man's hand.

The telephone rang insistently. Muza Filipovna came running into the office all out of breath.

"Alexei Nikolayevich, the chief engineer is angry. He says it's time to go to Comrade Batmanov."

Alexei began hastily gathering his papers from the table.

"I'll get it hot from Beridze—the report isn't ready. But I'm pleased, very pleased!"

He dashed out after the secretary, but Topolev detained him. The old man got out from

his folder a neat file of papers covered with clear round handwriting.

"I've been thinking a lot in solitude about the digging of the canal through the strait. I think I have found a suitable solution—to make the trench by blasting. I had a similar experience once before—true on a smaller scale. Take my memorandum with you for your report. Let it be my modest contribution."

Alexei, standing in the doorway, turned over the sheets of the memorandum. His instinct of an engineer told him at a glance that he held in his hand precisely what was lacking in the pipe line project.

There was a quick tapping of heels down the corridor and Muza Filipovna came running in again. Alexei looked Kuzma Kuzmich in the eyes, drew him towards him, kissed his drooping moustache with its homely smell of tobacco, and rushed out.

The telephone rang incessantly. Topolev picked up the receiver—for the first time in this office. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and his face was twisted as though in pain while he smiled. He put the receiver mechanically to his ear without saying "hullo," and heard

Beridze cursing fervidly. The chief engineer loosed his indignation at Kovshov for his irresponsibility in not keeping the appointment. Topolev hastened out into the corridor to overtake Alexei—he wanted to protect the young man somehow against Beridze's wrath—and ran into a group of people huddled round the door. Among them were Petya Gudkin and Zhenya Kozlova. Topolev was unable to pass them.

"Who are you waiting for?" he asked.

"Alexei Nikolayevich," Gudkin answered, and added with evident surprise. "He told us to apply to you on all matters."

"Then what are you dawdling here for, wasting time?" the old man said loudly, trying to conceal his emotion at the thought that his compact with Alexei had already come into force. "Come in, all of you, we'll go into everything you have!"

He sat down at the desk, took some pencils out of a drawer, and laid out his papers, throwing sidelong glances meanwhile at his visitors. They could not conceal their curiosity—neither the placid Zhenya, nor the embarrassed Gudkin and another technician from Kobzev's group and four other employees whom he did not know.

"Who's first? Ladies first, I suppose?" Kuzma Kuzmich asked cheerfully, and turned to Zhenya. "What can I do for you, comrade?"

"I can wait for Kovshov," Zhenya said uncertainly.

"Why wait? Besides, he's busy and will hardly be able to attend to you today," Topolev retorted firmly and with a touch of irony. "Well, what have you got?"

Zhenya laid out her tables.

"First, there's the daily progress report," she said. "Secondly, here are the labour computations for the quarterly plan. Comrade Grechkin asked Alexei Nikolayevich to look them through again."

"And thirdly?" the old man asked.

"Before he went out on the line Alexei Nikolayevich instructed me to change the rates and recalculate labour requirements for winter road work."

"Ah, that's interesting!" Topolev took the calculations from her and scanned the columns of figures written out in a large hand. "What does Alexei Nikolayevich figure on in making such a sharp increase in output rates?"

"I don't know."

"That's a pity, you ought to know." The old man laid aside the calculations and picked

up the progress report. "Oho, we're making good headway in pipe transportation I see! Isn't this a mistake here in regard to Section Five? Seems rather a lot."

"There's no mistake," Zhenya answered confidently. "Rogov is making a better showing than all the others—we get his reports every day."

"I see," drawled Kuzma Kuzmich. "I'd ask you, Comrade Kozlova, to bring me all the materials of the plan a little later. And a complete progress report for all sections. We'll go into it then."

"Very good," the girl answered, and went out, wrapping the white woolly shawl closer about her.

Topolev turned to the other visitors. One, a man from Fedosov's department, enquired whether bitumen No. 3 for pipe line insulation could be replaced by any other brand. Kuzma Kuzmich made a note of the question and promised to verify the possibility of a substitution by laboratory tests. Another brought from Filimonov a requisition for welding appliances, and asked for a final endorsement of their allocation among the sections. Two other men had come from the boiler room. It appeared that Alexei, before leaving on his trip along

the line, had complained that the head office staff was freezing through the fault of the boiler room. The men argued that the low quality of the local coal and the poor thermal insulation of the premises were to blame for the low temperature.

"Comrade Kovshov instructed me to go into the matter," Topolev said, although Alexei had not said a word to him about it. "I'll go down to the boiler room today and see whether we can't trace the cause of this leakage of warmth."

It afforded the old man an exquisite pleasure to deal with people and go into business matters. He knew that henceforth these duties would increase every hour.

He deliberately left Petya Gudkin until last. He stared fixedly at Gudkin for a full minute in mock severity. The youth met his gaze squarely.

"What is your business with Alexei Nikolayevich?" Topolev asked.

"It's about engineer Fursov," Petya said hesitatingly, thinking it was not for Topolev to settle such a question.

"What's the matter with Fursov?"

"How long are we going to put up with him, Kuzma Kuzmich!" Petya suddenly blurt-

ed out. "He openly makes fun of Beridze and all of us. Grubsky told him: 'the funeral of the new-born genius will take place in a few days.' He means our new project! Grubsky got a telegram calling him out to Rubezhansk. That's where he sent his protest to! Fursov says: 'Pyotr Yefimovich has been able to prove his point. . . .' "

Topolev was disturbed by this passionately imparted news—he had quite forgotten that his former chief was still putting up a resistance and was bent on fighting the matter out. "We'll see yet what you've been able to prove out there, my dear Pyotr Yefimovich," he thought, and asked aloud:

"Do you mean to say all of you together can't cope with one Fursov, can't take him in hand?"

"Who said we can't? You just give me permission and I'll chuck him out of the window!"

The old man regarded Gudkin narrowly, as though he were seeing him for the first time. The youth's lean figure, in its close-fitting pullover, was suggestive of great strength.

"He'd better be removed or there'll be trouble! We want him to keep his dirty hands off our project! Is it right for a man

to think one thing and do another, like Fursov?"

"It isn't right," Topolev readily agreed. "Have you spoken to Kovshov about this?"

"Kobzev was to have spoken to him, but you know what Kobzev is. He flared up and then quickly cooled down. That fellow Fursov must have soft-soaped him, or told him that he'd changed his mind. It doesn't cost him anything to play fast and loose. When Kobzev's around he's as meek as a lamb."

Kuzma Kuzmich pondered in silence, and Petya was already sorry he had told him about Fursov. It suddenly struck him that the old man was at one with Grubsky.

"Send Fursov to me at once," Topolev said. "And tell Kobzev I want to see him with the project materials. Come back yourself and ask all the other comrades in too—those Kobzev considers necessary."

Fursov came in with a ready little smirk on his face, pressed Topolev's hand deferentially, and enquired about his health.

"What's the trouble between you and Gudkin and the other comrades?" Topolev asked.

"You know yourself, Kuzma Kuzmich, what their attitude towards Grubsky is and towards

all of us who side with Pyotr Yefimovich. They're bewitched by their black-bearded Beridze, and every word of truth about him and his charlatan projects puts their dander up. I'm simply delighted that Pyotr Yefimovich has succeeded in proving his point."

"So you consider me a partisan of Grubsky's too?"

"You don't want me to consider you a partisan of Beridze, do you, Kuzma Kuzmich?" The idea tickled Fursov and he laughed. He did not notice the old man's scowling look.

"I'm glad to be able to disappoint you. I am precisely a partisan of Beridze's, and I can perfectly understand why this good youth Gudkin and his comrades refuse to tolerate you any longer in their midst." The old man said this with deep emotion and rose from his seat.

"You surprise me, Kuzma Kuzmich! I simply can't make you out!" Fursov exclaimed. "Why, aren't you Grubsky's closest friend?..."

"You needn't trouble to come here, beginning from tomorrow," Kuzma Kuzmich broke in, his voice rising. "Go to the personnel department—you're dismissed. I'll phone them."

Fursov could not understand what had happened to the old man, but the gravity of his tone and its drift were forcibly borne in upon him.

"Dismissed?" he queried. "You're dismissing me? You, engineer Topolev?"

"Yes, I, engineer Topolev, am dismissing you, engineer Fursov."

"I've been working conscientiously.... I did everything Kobzev told me to do—you ask him. Perhaps there's something I did not understand, I'll try to understand it...."

"That'll do. I see you are prepared to change your spots at a moment's notice."

"But I have a family, children.... I'll have to get some other work, and they'll ask me why I was discharged from the construction job where specialists are so badly needed."

"Certainly, they will ask that. But you should have thought of that before. Go on, turn over your affairs to Kobzev...."

Fursov, with his green scarf wound round his neck, cut a miserable figure. All his former aplomb and swagger were gone. He threw Topolev a dark look and, apparently realizing that there was no support to be gained in that quarter, he left the room. Kuzma Kuzmich

called him back. It suddenly occurred to the old man that only yesterday Beridze and Alexei could have treated him in the same way had they wished to.

"For your family's sake I think I'll reverse my decision," he said drily. "You'll remain on the construction job, but not on project work. You'll be transferred to the line and there you will put Beridze's project into effect. You will appreciate its merits all the sooner that way."

Fursov was on the point of saying something, but Topolev cut him short.

"You may go!" he ordered.

Alone in his office, Kuzma Kuzmich walked impatiently up and down. He was all eagerness to be doing things, to plunge into the thick of the work. He heard the call signals of the selector and hurriedly donned the earphones. It was Nekrasov from Section Three calling Kovshov.

"Hullo there, old friend," Kuzma Kuzmich greeted him. The engineers had worked together on various construction jobs and had been acquainted for some time. "It's me, Kuzma Kuzmich. Don't you recognize me?"

"It's such a long time since I heard that bass voice of yours that you can't blame me

for not recognizing it," Nekrasov replied in undisguised amazement.

"Well, I can make up for lost time by giving you a piece of good news."

"What's that?"

"You complained that your experience in blasting was going to waste around here, didn't you?"

"Well, you know yourself we're not doing any blasting, and that's always been my main occupation."

"What would you say if there happened to be some work in your line? And what work!"

"Now what bee have you got in your bonnet this time, old man? Out with it."

"If you want to find out get into a car, my friend, and come over here at once. . . ."

"How can I do that? I'd have to have permission from Batmanov and Beridze first."

"Am I not your chief? Well then, do as I tell you. Get into a car and come here as fast as you can."

The designers, herded by Gudkin, trooped into the office in a body, and laid a pile of project sheets before Topolev.

Kuzma Kuzmich leaned over the table, and for several minutes pored hungrily over the

drawings. He was particularly interested in everything that concerned work at the strait. Unable to restrain himself, the old man began altering one of the drawings showing the process of pipe welding on the ice. Petya Gudkin jumped up and darted towards the table—it hurt him to see the drawing scored up, for he had taken great pains with it. Kobzev laid a restraining hand on the young technician's arm, and they all stared at Topolev. The old man's eyes gleamed, his hand with the pencil dashed swiftly over the paper, and his whole figure seemed to radiate energy and vitality. In less than a minute the drawing was covered with a network of corrections and a line of new calculations.

"We'll set about it in a different way," Kuzma Kuzmich said, tilting back his chair. "A good deal will have to be altered."

Kobzev, followed by the other designers, went up to see what the old man had drawn on the paper. But he laid his big blue-veined hand over it.

"There's nothing to look at yet, it's only a detail. We'll have to alter everything that's been done in the matter of organizing strait work. Tell me, what solution have you for digging the trench on this section?"

"We really have no solution. It's the blank patch on our project," Kobzev answered. "I hope Beridze and Kovshov have brought back something with them from the line."

"That's exactly what they've done! So we have no more blank patch!" Topolev declared exultantly. "We're going to make the trench by blasting. . . ."

He enjoyed the effect of his words, then invited them all to sit down and began expounding the gist of his proposal, without however revealing that he was its author. At the most interesting point of his explanation he was interrupted by the arrival of the construction chief's private secretary. Batmanov wished to see Topolev.

"Aha, old boy, you're coming into fashion!" Topolev said to himself with satisfaction. He had been expecting this summons, waiting for it all the time. He all but ran down the corridor. Kobzev and Gudkin were barely able to keep up with him.

"Kuzma Kuzmich, why don't you finish what you were telling us, we shan't be able to get on with our work now till you come back," Gudkin pleaded.

Topolev did not hear. He quickened his pace. His moustache twitched as he hummed to himself in a small bass:

So your body and your soul stay forever young,
Stay forever young, stay forever young,
Never mind the heat or cold, never mind the snow or sun,
Make your muscles like steel!

He felt an irresistible urge to be up and doing, to be in the thick of the fight. He was thrilled by a sensation of life's fullness, a sensation that could be called happiness.

CHAPTER NINE

THE PROJECT IS APPROVED

BEFORE leaving with the engineers for Rubezhansk, whither he was summoned by the representative of the State Committee of Defence, Batmanov held a big conference at the head office on the question of the new project. Except for Grubsky, there was hardly anyone now at the head office who openly opposed the new project. On the other hand, not all could in full measure be called supporters of Beridze's proposals. These proposals upset established notions and seemed so daring that some engineers, while raising no objections to them and even admiring them, nevertheless had doubts as to their practicability. There were some who did not understand Beridze yet, considering him a talented and experienced engineer, but too apt to be carried away by his enthusiasms and to sail too near the wind.

Batmanov, who had seen for himself that the line builders themselves favoured the new project and were in fact already living by its laws, realized that to give it up was now out of the question. At the same time, his forthcoming trip to Rubezhansk and this preliminary conference were not a mere formality as far as he was concerned. Both he and Zalkind had decided to submit the new project to a final scrutiny by giving Beridze and Grubsky an opportunity to fight it out. They both understood the risk they were running in giving Beridze free rein—after all, the new project was being put into effect without its having been endorsed. If Beridze's proposals were approved in Rubezhansk and then in Moscow, everything would fall into its proper place. But what if Beridze had misreckoned, and Grubsky's cautious argumentation were to triumph? In that case the construction job would be at a dead end and they, its organizers, would be punished with all wartime severity.

All those whom Batmanov summoned to the conference felt the gravity of the moment. The very fact that such a conference was being held put people on the alert. Coming along

the corridor with Filimonov, Grechkin had remarked uneasily:

"We believe in Beridze, of course, but suppose he is making a mistake? They aren't being summoned to Rubezhansk for nothing. I wouldn't be surprised if Moscow has also told off Pisarev to look into this business and see what is going on here. There's no getting away from it, those people laboured over their project for years before our Georgian came along and turned everything upside down!"

Grechkin was talking in order to dispel his own doubts, but Filimonov as usual kept his own counsel.

Everyone closely watched the construction chief, trying to guess by his manner what awaited them. Batmanov was as calm and businesslike as always. His short opening speech neither increased doubts nor relieved them. It looked very much as though he had made up his mind not to influence the proceedings in any way. The construction chief eyed the assembled executives and sensed the state of their feelings. These feelings were visible both in the face of Grechkin, who never succeeded in concealing his emotions, and in the inscrutable mask of Filimonov. It struck Batmanov that he had never in all his previ-

ous experience had to deal with such a difficult situation. Just now, when his labour army was primed for action, the whole thing might fail.

The "opponents" sat facing each other. It so happened that Grubsky found himself in isolation—no one sat down beside him or near him. Contrary to expectation, the first to be given the floor was Beridze. Grechkin's brows went up in surprise. Batmanov seemed to be deliberately placing the chief engineer at a disadvantage.

Beridze held the typewritten text of his report before him, and began speaking in calm measured tones. When he came to the main point, however—the transfer of the construction line to the left bank—he began to warm to his subject, laid aside his report, and spoke for over an hour. Alexei illustrated his chief's ideas by a demonstration of drawings and charts. Beridze's passionate speech gripped the whole of his audience, and when he finished and sat down, the conference, on a single impulse, applauded him.

Then Grubsky got up. The volumes of the old project in blue leatherette binding lay before him in a pile. His hand rested on them as he began to speak, and the gesture prede-

termined, as it were, the character of his speech. He barely mentioned the old project—what need to speak of it, here it was, ten volumes of it, not a thing to be lightly dismissed. He confined himself to criticizing Beridze's proposals, and he was not lacking in arguments. He spoke fluently and earnestly, and this created an impression. Beridze, his burning eyes glued on Grubsky's face, flared up.

"Why don't you defend your own project, instead of attacking someone else's!" he cried. "One would think you had been invited for consultation."

Grubsky made a wry face and asked to be spared emotional outbursts that were out of place here.

"My emotions are not out of place! And it would be a good thing if you had them too, if you had the destiny of the pipe line and the destiny of our Homeland at heart!"

"I am no less concerned than you are with the destiny of the pipe line and the destiny of the Homeland," Grubsky said gravely without looking at Beridze.

"In that case let go of those fat folios and tell us how to fulfil the government's assignment!" Beridze shouted. "A comrade of mine, an artilleryman, wrote me from the front that

the war showed certain models of weapons to be obsolete. Your project is just an old cannon that requires immediate replacement. And you're trying to fight the enemy with it! You can consider yourself as good as killed."

"And you have invented a new cannon that only makes a noise!" snapped Grubsky. "It's hardly good enough for shooting sparrows. Unfortunately it's a diversion that will cost the state dear!..."

The businesslike tenor of the conference was upset. Liberman, cocking his eye knowingly at Batmanov, was whispering to the grinning Fedosov. Grechkin was exchanging views with Filimonov in excited undertones. Alexei regarded Batmanov with a puzzled air, baffled by the latter's apparent unconcern. In fact, the construction chief did not seem to be presiding at the conference at all. He did not interfere in the altercation between Beridze and Grubsky, and merely sat listening to their mutual recriminations, turning his head alternately from one to the other.

When Grubsky and Beridze had finished, Batmanov asked the chief engineer to briefly repeat the main features of the new project. Beridze looked closely at Batmanov, seeming

to gather calmness from him, and gave a ten-minute summary of his report.

"We propose," he said, "to run the line as far as the Olgokhta along the left bank. What are the advantages of the scheme? The line will be fifty kilometres shorter and we will need no more pipes than we have on hand—that's one thing. Secondly, it will be easier to lay the pipe line since the terrain on the left bank is considerably flatter. Thirdly, by following the left bank we avoid the ridge of hills on the right bank, and therefore there is no need to build a second pumping station on the mainland. Fourthly, there will be no need to span the Adun in two places and build a submerged duct across it at great expenditure of labour and capital. And finally, the left bank has another important advantage. The construction job is not directly interested in it, but the region is, including the town of Novinsk and the inhabitants of the Adun area. The railway track running off the trunk line, as you know, stops short at Novinsk. Further north there is no road. Our line on the left bank will provide this road north of Novinsk. The town will have good communications summer and winter with all the villages on the Adun, as only a few of them are

situated on the right bank. Furthermore, this road will bring us nearer to the river Olgokhta which, it is my profound conviction, will become in the future a source of electrical power for Novinsk industry. It is on the Olgokhta that the Far-Easterners will build their first powerful hydroelectric station.

"As a matter of fact, comrades, that power plant has already been designed by our chief engineer!" Grechkin cried out excitedly, carried away by Beridze's dry but impressive statement of facts.

Filimonov pulled him by the sleeve. Grechkin looked round him in confusion.

"That black beard has simply hypnotized me!" he whispered in his neighbour's ear: "When he talks and those big eyes of his start flashing it simply bowls me over. You forget all your doubts when you listen to him!"

"We propose," said Beridze, raising his voice, "laying the pipe line across this strait in the winter, without waiting until the summer. We intend making the trench at the bottom of the strait not by dredges but by blasting. We propose welding the pipes on the shore in big sections and moving them out onto the ice by tractor, and lowering them

into the strait off the ice.... The new project furthermore proposes reducing the volume of the first phase of the work. Until the oil is run through the pipe line we must complete only what is essential to get the oil started—the rest can be done afterwards. We shall thus save a good deal of time and manage with the labour resources which are at present available.... What do we propose to curtail for the time being? At the river and the strait crossings we can manage at the beginning with a single pipe line—there's no need to build a double tube at once. The second reserve line can be built when the oil starts running through the first line. The size of the oil tanks at the intermediate pumping stations can be reduced by half, and full capacity tanks built afterwards...."

Beridze surveyed his audience and continued:

"You also know that in view of the rigorous Far-Eastern winter we have to lay the pipe line two metres ten centimetres underground. This will ensure the pipe an even temperature—in other words, it will be protected against freezing and sharp fluctuations of temperature. What has to be done is to dig a deep trench from one end of the pipe line

to the other and after laying the pipes into it fill it up again. All in all this means excavating millions of cubic metres of earth. Now even if we put to work all the trench digging machines the territory can give us in addition to those which we already have, we would not be able to handle this job without doubling the number of workers. Hence we propose digging the trench only one metre deep instead of two, with a view to laying an embankment one metre high on top later, when the bulk of the workers have been released from the basic work.

"That is the only alternative to asking the state for several thousand more workers.... Those are our main proposals, stated briefly. They can be reconfirmed by technical calculations.... Allow me to sum up. All these undertakings of the new project, taken together,. will enable us to launch the pipe line system and run the oil down from the island to Novinsk on schedule, that is, by the next anniversary of the October Revolution!"

Most of those attending the conference had known all this before. Batmanov, too, was, of course, conversant with all the details of the new project. Nevertheless he and all the others listened to the chief engineer with close at-

tention and considered every one of his proposals carefully. Batmanov asked Grubsky to repeat his objections. All heads were again turned towards the little man with the birdlike face.

"When a man is determined at all cost to practise his inventive faculty and is bent on rediscovering America," Grubsky began with a sneer, "that man will look exactly like engineer Beridze. The construction line is planned on the right bank. But no, he must go and drag it over to the left bank! I haven't the slightest doubt that if our project had planned the line on the left bank, the inventor would have proposed switching it over to the right."

"I would, if that would solve the problem!" Beridze interjected.

"There you are! Engineer Beridze's entire inventiveness follows the same pattern. Once a double line has to be built across the river, he proposes getting along with one. Once we need large storage capacities to ensure the normal exploitation of the pipe line, the inventor decides to cut them down. Once it has been considered necessary to lay the pipe line two metres underground, our inventor promptly proposes another variant: one metre! The whole thing's much too primitive! I'm sorry to

see that the comrades take it all so seriously. We all wish to see the job done—I can understand that, but Beridze's devil-may-care irresponsible ideas can only cause harm."

"You should be the last man to speak of responsibility—you don't know the meaning of the word!" Beridze exploded. His opponent's grating, measured voice got on his nerves. "It's time you realized, consulting engineer Grubsky, that your job ends with talk and papers, while mine begins there. It's I who'll have to do the building, not you! And not simply do the building, but answer for it as well. I'm the chief engineer of the construction, and I never forget it."

"Even the charwomen are aware of that," Grubsky said in a bored tone.

Zalkind threw his pencil down on the table in a burst of anger, got up and took a turn about the room.

"The chief engineer has been appointed on this job by the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars," he said drily, stopping in front of Grubsky "I should advise you too to take Beridze's ideas seriously. It's a pity you haven't accepted them till now. And it's a pity that you don't understand what we have met here today for, and why the construction

chief has given you the floor twice. You treat us to witticisms, but we are not interested in hearing them."

Grubsky's eyes dropped before the Party organizer's gaze and he turned his face away.

"I'm made of flesh and blood too, and it's hard for me not to answer Beridze," he said in a low voice, as though addressing Zalkind alone. "That's why I occasionally drop into controversial tone. Believe me, I am deeply convinced of the fallaciousness of the chief engineer's views." He paused, and rubbed his high forehead with its flattened temples with a trembling hand. "I would have no option but to congratulate him on his brilliant victory and bow down to the ground before him if what he proposes were scientifically substantiated and technically practicable. The trouble is that his own desire to be helpful, combined with his temperament, prevent him from soberly perceiving the precipitancy and error of his deductions.... I repeat again and again—our project has been made by the efforts of men who have worked long and hard on it. Our solutions were arrived at not through mere chance. Why did we choose the right bank for the pipe line? Do you imagine we did not see the advantages of the left bank—

the same advantages that Beridze has seen? We did see them. But the left bank in a number of places is subject to floods, and the history of the Adun shows that there have been years when the flooding of the left bank assumed the dimensions of a catastrophe. It is not difficult to see that if the pipe line were to be submerged under water any bursting of the joints would put it out of commission for a protracted period. There's nothing to argue about here. A mere glance at technical literature is sufficient to convince you that foreign authorities forbid the laying of a pipe line under conditions similar to those on the left bank."

Grubsky opened one of the volumes lying in front of him and read out a passage in confirmation of what he said, first in English, then in Russian.

"I have a head of my own on my shoulders," Beridze said. "I don't intend blindly following your German and American authorities in everything. They're not gods, they very frequently make mistakes, and they don't know everything by a long chalk!"

"No engineer worthy of the name can ignore their opinions," the shocked Grubsky answered with dignity, holding the thick book

aloft. "The left bank is excluded, and that being the case, we must reject its alluring advantages. Whether we like it or not a second pumping station will have to be built at the Olgokhta, though it would obviously be much pleasanter to do without it. Even with the left-bank variant I consider it risky to reject the idea of a second station. Just imagine how risky it will be for the pipe line to have only one pumping station on the mainland. What a ridiculous plight we would be in if one fine day the pressure should prove inadequate to drive the oil to Novinsk. What will you do then?"

Grubsky drew breath and wiped his wet brow with a snow-white handkerchief.

"We shall also have to build two passages across the Adun, it intersects the line in two places on the right bank. The population of the Adun will have to do without a road to Novinsk for the time being—I agree with the chief engineer that that road is needed much more urgently on the left than on the right bank. The rest of his proposals boil down to lopping off, pinching and cutting down the technical equipment of the future pipe line as much as possible. You can lop off, of course, but you should first of all think of the incon-

veniences and restrictions that this will involve in the exploitation of the system. I'm afraid—"

"You're afraid of everything!" Beridze flung in again, unable to restrain himself. "As an engineer you ought to know that there are limits and restrictions in the work of any mechanism and construction!"

Batmanov shook his head slightly to restrain Beridze. He sat listening attentively to Grubsky and noticed the look of dismay on the faces of his executives. His eye frequently met the worried, almost pleading glance of Alexei. But the more Batmanov listened to Grubsky, weighing his own attitude towards the latter's denunciations, the lighter did his heart grow.

"I'll just cite two examples to convince you of the risk you are running by making these cuts and reductions," Grubsky went on. "It is suggested that we should first build a single pipe line at the crossings. That's no good! We must at all costs have two, and both at once. Just imagine a rupture in the pipe line under the water in the strait or in the river. What are you going to do then without a reserve line? The oil will have to be cut off until the single line is repaired. A fine piece of work, I must say!... We are told to reduce tank

capacity along the line. That's no good! We must have big tanks, so that in the event of rupture at the joints occurring anywhere along the line the part of the pipe line preceding the point of rupture can go on pumping the oil into the reserve tanks. If you won't have these big tanks, what are you going to do with the oil? Stop the pipe line again? That's a poor idea, very poor!..."

Grubsky fell silent, but he did not sit down. After a pause, Batmanov asked him:

"Have you finished?"

"Yes," Grubsky answered, and looked at Topolev who sat slightly apart in a deep armchair. The old man had not uttered a word all the time. "As to the strait proposals, I did not want to touch on them at all—I consider them simply beneath criticism. But the chief engineer has spoken about them with such fervour and earnestness, that one is apparently expected to say something about this part of the report too. I am categorically opposed to winter welding. Beridze must certainly be aware of the fact that this is not countenanced in engineering." Grubsky lifted another fat book above his head with an air almost of solemnity. "As to the blasting method for dig-

ging a trench through the strait, it's simply a childish idea."

"It's an idea that has behind it the wisdom of forty years' experience of the Russian engineer Topolev!" Alexei cried in indignation.

Everyone looked at Kuzma Kuzmich and smiled—he sat with utter unconcern and seemed to be dozing.

"I greatly appreciate the experience of engineer Topolev, but it is my honest opinion that his proposal is anything but wise. Why, it's absurd! To lay the charge the divers will have to dig the sea bottom under the ice and water! Perhaps it would be just as well to make the divers dig the whole trench through the strait by hand?"

"But you have already been told that we do not intend digging a trench for the explosives in the sea bottom," Topolev suddenly spoke up in his deep-chested voice. He looked up and glared at his former patron. "You didn't understand a damn thing, and you have the impudence to criticize! We'll lower the charges to the bottom and explode them—and that's that."

"You'll only be blasting water and ice!" Grubsky sneered, pleased that he had provoked the old man to argument.

"Nonsense!" Topolev retorted with scorn. "The charge will explode with equal force upwards against the thick of the ice and water, and downwards into the earth. The downward impact will form a trench and that's all we need."

"I doubt it!" Grubsky said with a sneer. "I doubt it very much!"

"I shall put my proposal into effect myself, and I invite this sceptic to take a trip down to the strait," Topolev said, addressing Batmanov. "If he's not afraid of catching cold, he'll have a chance of seeing something that has not been recorded yet in the fat foreign books he is so fond of referring to!..."

Grubsky finally sat down, and in the ensuing silence everybody, including Zalkind and Beridze, turned to Batmanov. He still remained silent, taking his time, and his glance travelled over the faces before him. Kovshov, studentlike, raised his hand impatiently as a sign that he wished to speak. The chief responded with a faint smile, and Alexei's fears were allayed—he understood that further talk was unnecessary, Batmanov himself would say all

there was to be said. Vasili Maximovich extinguished his cigarette, whispered something to Zalkind and got up, straightening the folds of his well-fitting tunic.

"I consider the clash of opinions which we have witnessed to be of great objective value," Batmanov began. "The positions of our project"—he accentuated the word "our"—"have now become clearer and stronger. Comrade Grubsky merely criticizes, but he has no counter-proposals to make. As things now stand the new project, drafted in record time, provides the only solution to the problem with which we are faced. It would be wrong, of course, to jump at the proposals of Beridze and his assistants without submitting them to searching analysis If we failed to do so we should be displaying crass childish credulity, and that does not become us. Everything in the new project, however, is within the limits of our understanding, there is nothing particularly tricky about it, and we see, we know, we are convinced that the new technical solutions provided are sufficiently substantial and well-founded, based on calculations and observations and backed by the experience of a whole collective of engineers, and not of Beridze alone. These solutions are daring? Yes! But

then we ourselves are not the timid kind. They are risky, these proposals of our engineers? Yes, they are! But we're not afraid of running risks. Our risk is not rash and blind. Beridze's risk is the risk of an innovator. We performed the whole technical revolution in our country by running certain risks."

Batmanov took Beridze's report from the table, held it in his hand as though weighing it, and paused for a second.

"In the long run I am the first to be responsible for all of you and for the fate of the construction job. And I am not afraid to shoulder the responsibility for the consequences of my decision. Just imagine, Comrade Grubsky, that at this very minute the commander of some army is making an important decision out there at the front. Is he running a risk or not? He certainly is! Nothing worthwhile is done in the world without risk. . . ."

Batmanov's words, as usual, steadily took a hold of his hearers by virtue of their restrained inner power. Liberman sat listening with rapt attention, evidently realizing for the first time that the dispute between the engineers was something more than an amusing diversion. Topolev lifted his head. Alexei and Grechkin had their eyes glued to Batmanov's

face. Batmanov did not confine himself to generalities, but gave an analysis of both conflicting conceptions. Alexei felt proud of the construction chief, who displayed a profound understanding of the finer technical points.

"It's as clear to me as that two and two make four that the authors of the old project made a mistake in slavishly yielding to the influence of authorities of whom Grubsky has here shown himself to be such a devout worshipper. I have no intention of wholly repudiating foreign engineering experience—that would be an act of ignorance. But I agree with Beridze that we must think for ourselves. I'm sorry for those people who have been working with you on that project, Comrade Grubsky. You have beclouded their minds with an erroneous basic premise, and all their work has proved useless. Yes, useless. And, apparently, even harmful.

"I have already asked myself the question—is the problem of building the pipe line in a single year only a wartime problem? Or is the three-year period wrong in general? In my opinion it is impermissible under any circumstances to allot so much time for building the pipe line. Even before the war the line should not have been run along the right bank without

making allowance for the interest of the population and the latter's aid, without providing for the utmost economy in expenditures. This was an error resulting from complacency and an attitude of indifference towards the question of tempo. The war helped us to discover this mistake. The war, and our government's farsightedness. But this I know—that had Beridze been sent here before the war he would still have readjusted the project to a swifter rate of progress. The whole practice of Socialist construction has taught Beridze to appreciate the time factor. It's a pity it has not taught Grubsky that. And I should like to say this to Comrade Grubsky.... Today one year seems to us an extremely short time for an undertaking of this type. But who knows whether this pace will not strike us as too slow after the war?"

Batmanov paced back and forth before the window and continued:

"The materials submitted by Beridze and Kovshov convincingly prove that the line should be run along the left bank. The engineers have done right in going among the people and discussing their ideas with them, instead of confining themselves solely to works of reference. Generally, it is worth while remember-

ing that these ideas originated both above—with the chief engineer, and below—with the rank-and-file men of the local construction units. Grubsky made a mistake in superciliously rejecting them—they were suggested by life itself!"

Batmanov chuckled.

"The dire warnings about the left bank being subjected to disastrous floods exaggerate the danger. True, there are two sections there that are inundated in greater measure than the right bank. That, however, should not frighten us. Comrade Beridze was right in pointing out that the possible leaks at some of the joints in the pipe line will occur with the setting in of spring and winter when the temperature fluctuations will be the greatest. Floods on the Adun, however, take place in July and August, when bursting of joints is most unlikely.... Let us, suppose, however, that the pipe line will be submerged. Our innovators have proved, contrary to all manner of expert opinion, that there is no need to be afraid of the water. A well-insulated pipe acquires the best static conditions precisely in water. The seepage of water into the trench creates an elastic bed for it and lessens the pressure of the earth above it.... Moreover, pressure inside the pipe line at the sev-

enth and eighth sections where the flood level is the highest will not exceed fifteen atmospheres. And this is little enough—an insignificant fraction of the seventy-atmosphere pressure which the pipe line is designed to withstand. To all intents and purposes a pressure as low as that precludes any possibility of the joints springing leaks."

Batmanov absent-mindedly reached for a cigarette and stuck it between his lips only to lay it back on the desk.

"These things are so clear and convincing that I cannot help being amazed by the extent of Grubsky's error which he does not want to admit to this day!

"The rest of his objections, fortunately, are either merely controversial and unsubstantiated, like his objections against the blasting method, or simply unscrupulous. Grubsky has asserted that Beridze is endangering the future of the pipe line by pruning its technical equipment. No one has proposed anything of the kind! What has been proposed is to divide the volume of work into two phases—first, to do what is most urgently needed in order to start the pipe line, and secondly, after fulfilling the government's main assignment to complete all the rest of the work. Grubsky tries to fright-

en us, but we are not afraid! We are not afraid to start pumping the oil through a single pipe in the rivers and the strait. Why, according to Grubsky, even double tubes are not enough—what if they were both to break down! We shall lay the second tube as soon as we have finished the first. Even if anything were to happen, we have the whole army of builders on the spot and can deal promptly with all emergencies In short, we must not be afraid. We shall take the risk, comrades! I move that these words be accepted as the decision of our conference—we shall take the risk!"

Batmanov made a sweeping gesture with his hands and laughed. The room was filled with a hum of approval Batmanov resumed his seat and lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply.

Alexei glanced at Grubsky. Everyone had forgotten him. He sat, a lone figure, behind a pilé of books and the volumes of his project. Grubsky, with craning neck, stared bleakly at Batmanov. The former chief engineer seemed to be on the verge of tears.

Upon alighting from the train at Rubezhansk, Batmanov, Zalkind, Beridze, Kovshov and Grubsky were met by a lieutenant, Pisarev's

aide. They had barely taken their seats in the two cars waiting for them outside the railway station, when the loud shriek of a siren resounded over the square, followed by a man's voice in the loud-speaker announcing in a repeated monotone: "Citizens, air-raid alarm!"

"Step on the gas, we must get through without delay!" the lieutenant cried to the chauffeur, then turned to Batmanov and Zalkind sitting behind: "We're only ten flying minutes from the frontier, that's why we re constantly having air-raid drills. How is it at Novinsk—quiet?"

The two cars flashed down the deserted streets. A group of planes flew low over the town. At the crossroads AA gunners were hastily drawing off the covers from their guns. Civilian defence squads, complete with gasmask kits and stretchers, ran to their stations. Three cars of the emergency repairs service hurtled past with a roar of motors.

"The pedagogical institute.... Circus.... Scientific library. Municipal hospital No. 1.... Drama theatre.... Medical institute," the lieutenant named the buildings on either side of the road as they flashed past

Ignoring the warning signals, the cars passed a "bomb-damaged" section and turned

onto the main street. A broad, smoothly-paved thoroughfare with tall buildings, it had a metropolitan air about it. The cars drew up outside the premises of the Regional Party Committee, a big six-story grey building.

"The State Committee of Defence representative is with the regional committee secretary. He asked me to bring you straight here," the lieutenant explained.

Batmanov and Zalkind went into Dudin's private office, leaving the engineers in the waiting room. Grubsky sat down on a sofa slightly apart and unfolded one of the papers lying on a little table. Beridze walked up to the huge window, reaching from floor to ceiling. Here, from this fifth-floor eminence, he commanded a view of the whole town which lay sprawling over the low hills. Its steeply sloping streets were generously bathed in sunshine, and the snow sparkled on the roofs. The broad Adun flung its semicircle round the town, and the grey expanse of the frozen river stretched away to the horizon.

"A penny for your thoughts," Alexei said, laying his hand on Beridze's shoulder.

"They are all of Tatyana. This was her home town. I should like to meet her mother."

At this point they were invited into the office—a large airy room with massive mahogany furniture. Batmanov introduced the engineers. Pisarev, a tall, powerfully-built man in the uniform of a general, with grey hair combed back over his forehead and large features, rose from his chair and greeted them with a vigorous handshake, studying each of them narrowly. Dudin, a man of short stature, corpulent though still young, with a badge of the Supreme Soviet deputy on his tunic of military cut, greeted Beridze as an old friend, and regarded Kovshov and Grubsky with interest.

Dudin waited until the members of the regional committee staff, whom he had summoned, and the stenographer arrived, then he picked up one of the telephones on his desk and called the regional executive committee, and on being told that the chairman had left on an urgent visit to some factory and would be unable to attend, he gave Batmanov the floor without further ado. The construction chief gave a detailed and clear account of the conflict between Beridze and Grubsky, of the new project and the recent conference at the head office, and the progress of the construction work which had already been switched over to the new project. In conclusion he laid copies of

the conference minutes before Pisarev and Dudin.

"Now let us hear what the engineers have to say," Dudin said, turning to Grubsky. "You have the floor. We want to hear everything. The project decides the fate of the pipe line, and we must know whether the construction organizers are erring or not."

Grubsky launched into a detailed account, citing figures and calculations. He set forth the main features of the new and old projects and wound up by criticizing Beridze's proposals. But there was no fervour or conviction in his speech. Even Beridze noticed it, and looked at his opponent in surprise. Apparently Grubsky no longer believed that he would be able to gain his point.

Beridze, in the course of half an hour, adduced his evidence in defence of his proposals. He was calm and collected, and did not this time drop into a tone of controversial acrimony. Batmanov listened to him with secret amusement as he recalled the passion with which the engineers had argued and insulted each other at the recent meeting in his office. As he had shrewdly calculated, they had worn off the edge of their passions during the debate in his office, and appeared here free of animus

and of all else that could have prevented Pisarev and Dudin from getting to the bottom of the matter.

"Eyes like those can see everything," Alexei thought, noticing that Pisarev was studying Grubsky with peculiar intentness Kovshov felt easy in his mind, notwithstanding the fact that it was precisely here and now that the fate of the project was being decided. The sensation was no doubt stimulated in him by Grubsky's uncertain manner and Beridze's confident tone.

"I daresay this is not the first time you have heard Beridze's arguments?" Dudin asked Grubsky. "The dispute between you started upon your first acquaintance. Tell us honestly, have you changed your views since you sent us your memorandum? Perhaps it is difficult for you to overcome the spirit of sheer contradiction? It happens that way sometimes—a man undertakes something, makes a false step, and then finds it awkward to retreat. Admit it, before it is too late. The construction job, as Comrade Batmanov says, is proceeding in conformity with the new project. If the direction it has taken is a wrong one, it will be a catastrophe, and an irreparable one."

"I am deeply convinced that the path chosen by the comrades is a wrong one. The pres-

ent state of the construction job is actually a catastrophe," Grubsky said, rising to his feet again.

"What do you propose in the way of saving the construction job from this 'catastrophe' and fulfilling the government's assignment?"

"Unfortunately I can propose nothing," Grubsky confessed. "The pipe line cannot be built within the prescribed time. It were better to admit this now, than later, when the tremendous efforts of many people will have proved to be futile."

The regional committee secretary eyed Grubsky with obvious distaste.

"That's an unconsidered answer, a poor answer, Comrade Grubsky. Yet you had plenty of time in which to consider it."

Grubsky was silent. His hands hung limp and he could barely meet the gaze of Dudin fixed upon him.

"Do you know whose support you have in your assertion that the pipe line cannot be built?" Pisarev asked. He had a deep mellow voice and spoke slowly. "You'll be surprised—Goebbels, he's at one with you. Yes, yes, don't be indignant," he added, slightly raising his voice as he noticed Grubsky start and flush.

"Let it be known to you that the German magazines, on Goebbels' instructions, have recently started writing about your construction job. The gist of these fascist writings is this—the Bolsheviks have taken it into their head to build an oil pipe line from Taisin to Novinsk, and even threaten to lay it under the stormy waters of the Jagdinsk strait. The Bolshevist idea, if you please, has no practical significance, but it is curious as an example of Soviet propaganda which is out to prove that the war is going to last more than one year. When all is said and done, let them go ahead and build their pipe line—say these myrmidons of Goebbels. The war will soon be over and everything they manage to do will fall into the hands of our Far-Eastern allies." Pisarev fell silent for a moment and then added sarcastically: "It remains but to congratulate you on such a coincidence of views."

Grubsky tried to say something but he could not. He swayed, dropped into his seat and covered his face with his hands.

"You can't imagine how risky Beridze's proposal is!" he said vehemently at last, looking from Pisarev to Dudin. "How can I convince you? All the precious resources that we are now expending will go up in smoke...."

Pisarev shook his head, pushed back his armchair noisily, and rose.

"I should imagine that's exactly the way some gentlemen argue in America. We should not, they say, help the Soviets build the Far-Eastern pipe line. They have lost the war, and even if by some miracle they do run the pipe line through the taiga it will fall into the hands of the Japanese just the same. Then it's good-bye to our money and supplies. I should advise you, Grubsky, to give serious thought to the role you are playing. The construction management has not complained to us, but we know ourselves that you have been a thorn in the side of Beridze and his assistants. You are an engineer of standing and reputation, not the kind of man one can dismiss with a wave of the hand. I've been listening to you and trying to understand the reason for your error which has, in fact, resulted in your complete rupture with the construction job."

Beridze and Alexei sat without stirring. The weight of the stricture expressed by Pisarev was heavy indeed and Grubsky visibly bent beneath it.

"You have lost all sense of realities and responsibility," Dudin interposed. "How could you have failed to become Beridze's assistant?

Topolev realized who was in the right, didn't he? You were scared of taking risks, and decided to have nothing to do with him. What serious accomplishments can be made in life without taking risks?"

Alexei and Beridze exchanged glances—the regional committee secretary had almost literally repeated what Batmanov had said at the conference. Dudin lit a cigarette. Pisarev, who was pacing the thick carpet that muffled the sound of his footsteps, sat down and also lit up.

"Comrade Batmanov!" he said after a strained pause.

Batmanov got up.

"I order you to consider engineer Grubsky discharged as of today. His presence at the construction is only harmful. Besides, I consider him unworthy of being listed as a participant of a glorious construction undertaking in which he does not believe." Pisarev turned to Grubsky. "Yes, I'm relieving you of work on the construction, and the necessity of taking risks. And I do not think I will be easily persuaded to allow you to come back when you have realized your mistake.... Do you understand me?" the State Committee of Defence representative said, turning to Batmanov again.

"I understand."

"I have no more questions to Grubsky," Pisarev said to Dudin.

"You may go," the regional committee secretary said to Grubsky.

Grubsky sat on for a minute as though the words had not sunk in, then he rose and walked towards the door with a heavy tread.

It all happened so swiftly that Alexei was stunned. He looked with deep respect at Dudin and Pisarev, thinking of the measure of responsibility that lay upon them not only for the pipe line construction but for the fate of the whole vast region stretching along the frontier of a hostile world and nearly ten thousand kilometres removed from Moscow.

"We shall adjourn our conference until tomorrow," Pisarev said, rising. "I'm convinced that your project is correct. But Comrade Dudin and I must report it to the State Committee of Defence...."

The next day the construction representatives were called out once more to the regional committee, this time without Grubsky. They were received again by Dudin and Pisarev. When they were seated, Pisarev, a smile hover-

ing at the corners of his firm mouth, asked the regional committee secretary in a humourous tone:

"Shall I tell them or not?"

"I suppose we shall have to," the latter acquiesced good-naturedly.

"We reported about the construction job yesterday to Comrade Stalin," Pisarev said impressively. "Comrade Stalin has approved the project, and said that he regards the pipe line construction as a big battle with its own strategy and tactics, its own ordeals and sacrifices. Comrade Stalin has expressed the conviction that Batmanov and his army of builders will win the battle, since the plan of offensive is correct and there are all the prerequisites for victory. . . ."

Batmanov, Zalkind, Beridze and Kovshov stood up on a single impulse. Alexei could hear his heart hammering loudly.

"We shan't disgrace ourselves, Comrade Kovshov, shall we?" Pisarev asked the young engineer. The depth of feeling expressed in Alexei's face arrested his attention.

"We shall not, Comrade Representative!" Alexei rapped out crisply.

"And now tell us how things are progressing at the works' sections," Pisarev said. "Pre-

sent your demands to me and Comrade Dudin."

Batmanov gave an exhaustive account, going into the minutest details. He possessed a remarkable memory that had no need for notes. The construction chief rattled off figures, names and materials with such ease that one would think he had them all docketed in his head. Although the conversation was being taken down by a stenographer, Dudin jotted down Batmanov's requests in his writing pad.

"Look here, my dear comrade," he said, rising, with both hands resting on the table "I've received a disturbing signal from the strait. The welder Umara Mahomet—I sent him to the construction job myself—writes that things at that important section are in a bad way. It's a crying shame! He complains about Merzlyakov—I think that's the name of the section chief. Umara is a Communist and I believe him. What's the trouble there? Which of you has visited the strait, and when?"

"I must confess that I didn't get that far yet," Batmanov said. "I intended going down there as soon as I got back to Novinsk, together with Comrade Beridze. We shall stay there

until we get things going at full speed. In the meantime I have sent Pankov down—he's a reliable and resourceful man, and it was my idea eventually to appoint him in place of Merzlyakov. Pankov, for some reason, doesn't give any news of himself."

"Umara's signal is most alarming," Pisarev said. "Bear in mind, Comrade Batmanov, that if I or Comrade Dudin make a trip down to the strait before you do, your position won't be an envious one."

Batmanov looked up with dignity.

"I repeat, I intend leaving for the strait immediately. I had no right till now to absent myself for long. The questions concerning the whole construction were more important than those of a single section, even though it is the most difficult section. And there was no sense in going out there only for a day or two. As for the engineers, they had nothing to do for the time being at the strait—we must remember that its technical problem was solved only a few days ago by Topolev. A man of the type of Pankov was more needed at the section than any number of engineers. I can't understand what has happened to him."

"I know that you have not been wasting your time," Pisarev said with a faint smile

and in a tone of approval. "Your direction of construction affairs reveals a well thought-out plan, and I am not finding fault with that. But fatal slips are possible under the best of plans."

"Although I allow the possibility of things at the strait being in a bad way—in fact I am now certain of it—I can assure you, Comrade Pisarev and Comrade Dudin, that everything will be in order by the time you arrive!"

After the conference Batmanov closeted himself with Pisarev—there were many things yet to be discussed and settled in detail. Beridze was in a hurry to get away. He asked for a car and went off, as Alexei had shrewdly suspected, to see Tanya's mother. Zalkind had some business to attend to at the regional committee offices. Kovshov found himself at a loose end.

"Go to the hotel and take a rest," the Party organizer advised him. "I'll soon be through here, and will join you with my daughter. We'll go out somewhere, the three of us."

Alexei tactfully declined, not wishing to intrude on Zalkind's meeting with his daughter.

"Yesterday I bumped into a fellow named Khmara, and he hauled me off to his place," he said. "I haven't had a chance to see any of

the sights yet. I want to visit the museum and go to the musical comedy in the evening. I've heard so much about Liberman's brother I'd like to see for myself how good he is. . . ."

When he came back to the hotel that night Kovshov found Zalkind and Beridze there in a state of great excitement.

"Alexei!" Beridze cried, rushing up to him. "The Germans have been defeated at Moscow. About a hundred thousand Fritzes have been destroyed. Rejoice, Alexei! Rejoice, my dear boy!"

CHAPTER TEN

ON THE WAY TO THE STRAIT

BAD LUCK overtook the driver Makhov on his fourth trip. So far the truck had been performing very well, and now suddenly the engine gave a barely audible cough. Then there was a knock, and the engine spluttered and stalled. The truck was carried along some few metres by inertia, then came to a standstill. At once an uncanny silence reigned.

Makhov pushed the door open. The wind rushed into the driver's cab and stung his face. He had heard on leaving the base that the temperature had dropped to forty-five below zero. Makhov threw back the bonnet and switched on the light. The engine was cooling fast, the frost chilled the driver to the marrow, notwithstanding the protection of sheepskin coat and padded jacket. Makhov hastily opened the carburetor. It was empty. Either it was clogged

or else the gasoline had run out, contrary to his reckoning.

Makhov's fingers stiffened and ached. Wincing with the pain, he unscrewed the feed pipe and detached the tube. Now for the most unpleasant part: Makhov put his lips to the tube and blew. A clot of snow flew out and a splash of spray—there was no fuel. Makhov shut his eyes and tore the tube from his lips to which it had frozen. He licked the blood with his tongue and put the tube back into place with hands that already were numb, then started looking for the mislaid carburetor bolt. He found it at last, but it was some time before he could grasp it with his fingers.

Makhov glanced down the road with a feeling of annoyance and growing alarm. Where could Solntsev be all this time? There was not a sign of his truck along the road. He could borrow some petrol from him and warm up the engine with his help. It vexed Makhov to think that Solntsev would gain by this. Solntsev would beat him for the first time since their pipe transportation competition, and Musya Kuchina, the attendant of the special bonus kiosk, would say mockingly to him, and not to Solntsev as she usually did: "Your rival friend has unloaded an hour ago, had his

coffee, collected his cigarettes, had a smoke and gone off on a new trip."

But this was no time to think of bonuses or even rivalry. While Makhov was tightening the bolts his hands grew numb altogether, and still worse, the engine had gone cold. The driver slapped his knees furiously to restore life to his hands. Suddenly he heard the crackling of the freezing radiator tubes, and the sound smote his heart. He rushed to let the water out, and stopped suddenly in his tracks as he caught sight of Solntsev's approaching truck.

Makhov began waving his arms, and the truck stopped. Solntsev, without getting out, threw a mocking nod to his rival and promptly refused to give him any gasoline.

"I like the idea!" he shouted above the hum of his running motor. "That's called giving your horse away and riding shanks' mare yourself.... I'm short of gas myself. You should have filled your tank properly to begin with. Besides, it isn't in my interest to share with you. So long!"

He slammed the door of his cabin and rode off. The dumbfounded Makhov was at a loss for words to express his indignation. Only when the truck had disappeared and Solntsev

could no longer hear him did Makhov recover his power of speech.

"Left a comrade in the lurch, the son of a gun!" Makhov shouted, running after the truck with upraised fists. "Ugh, you blasted individualist!" The word "individualist," introduced as an epithet of opprobrium by Rogov, had become a term of abuse among the drivers.

In his excitement Makhov forgot about his own truck. He stood in the roadway staring after Solntsev's truck which was now a mere speck. He seemed to be hypnotizing it to stop. Then he went back and started a bonfire, fighting back a desire to cry out from the pain in his hands. Busy with the fire he did not notice a small truck drive up. Beside the Nanai driver sat Maxim Hodger, the chairman of the village Soviet; he was on his way to the district centre. Hearing of Makhov's ill luck, he and the driver, with one accord, offered him some of their gasoline.

"You've got to deliver the pipes—that's more important. I can make the trip some other time," Hodger said, lending a hand to transfer the gasoline from tank to tank.

Makhov, overwhelmed by a flood of feeling he could find no words to express, wrung Hodger's hand, and found his tongue only

when he got behind the steering wheel of his truck.

"I'll never forget this, Maxim," he said, his bleeding lips barely moving. "You've done me a real good turn. I'm your debtor now."

After driving for about three kilometres Makhov saw a truck in front of him through the frozen windscreen. Its front wheels were sunk deep in the roadside snowdrifts, and the body of the truck with its pipe-loaded trailer had swung round almost blocking the road. Solntsev was pottering around the truck. Seeing the oncoming car, he raised his hand. Makhov throttled down his truck without stopping, opened the door and shouted out:

"Ta-ta! Don't forget to empty the radiator. And I'd advise you not to lose time and run for help—it isn't very far, just about ten kilometres. So long!"

And Makhov carefully manoeuvred his truck past. But his ire and irritation had already cooled off. A minute later he felt a twinge of remorse. From the way Solntsev's truck was standing, he guessed that the man had been trying to turn back. "I bet he wanted to return and help me," Makhov thought, "I'd never forgive myself for such meanness

for the rest of my days!" he said aloud, and jammed on his brakes.

Panting and groaning with the effort, he detached the trailer with the pipes, swung round on the road and went back. Solntsev met him with a cry of joy.

"Forgive me, old man," he said guiltily. "I can't make out what came over me. A regular individualist! What's the matter with your lips? Look, they're bleeding. Here, take this handkerchief and wipe them carefully!..."

They set to work at once to tow the stranded truck free of the snowdrift. After strenuous efforts they finally succeeded.

"I couldn't go on, my conscience began to bother me," Solntsev explained. "I started to swing her round and landed in the snowdrift. I stood here worrying myself to death, not on my account, but on yours.... When you drove past I was so glad to see you'd got out, I didn't even feel sore about it. But I sort of knew that you'd come back, you wouldn't go off and leave me stranded. Where the devil do you think we get that yellow capitalist streak from, eh?"

They looked at each other and laughed. Makhov threw away his cigarette with the blood-stained mouthpiece and said resolutely:

"Let's keep mum about this incident. I'd be ashamed for people to know about it.... Agreed?"

They rode together the rest of the way and went together to the kiosk—a bus equipped as a travelling refreshment bar for the drivers Since the "inwards" method of pipe transportation had been introduced, the refreshment bar was stationed at the route terminus, at the spot where the pipes were unloaded. The drivers who delivered the pipes to their destination received an extra lunch by the way of bonus in addition to their usual meal.

Musya Kuchina, the rosy-cheeked mistress of the bus, stared in amazement at the two drivers as they entered in a cloud of vapour. They had left their sheepskin coats in the trucks. Both smelt strongly of gasoline.

"Well I never! This is the first time I see those two coming in together. Solntsev has somehow managed to overtake Makhov today," she said, addressing Batmanov, who sat here in the company of Beridze, Kovshov, Topolev, Filimonov and Liberman. The construction chief was travelling with his team to the remote section and had stopped at Musya's refreshment bar to warm up. The truck drivers were taken aback upon seeing the manage-

ment and stood shifting their weight from one foot to another.

"Come in, friends!" Batmanov said, studying them with interest. "Collect your bonuses and tell us how you earn them. Now I know why pipe transportation has been making such progress at Rogov's section."

Makhov and Solntsev took their caps off and sat down at one of the little tables fixed up inside the roomy bus. Musya hastened to them with two mugs of steaming coffee, sandwiches and cigarettes on a tray. She looked attentively at Makhov, whose unnaturally red lips cut a startling line in his face, and asked anxiously:

"Why did you fall behind today? What's the matter with your lips? Who've you been kissing out in the frost?"

Makhov took the mug without answering and raised it hungrily to his mouth. At the same instant he put it down again—the hot drink scorched his lips.

"I had a breakdown and he helped me out. It was the carburetor he kissed, see?" Solntsev answered for him.

"I see!" Musya cried, brightening up, and looked at Batmanov triumphantly. The latter was whispering something to Liberman.

"Wait a minute with the coffee, friends. There is a little bonus here due from us," Batmanov said, turning to the drivers.

Liberman, smiling blandly, placed before the truck drivers a bottle of spirits, tinned food and two bars of chocolate.

"Thank you, Comrade Batmanov," Makhov said, carefully pushing away the bottle. "You're wrong if you think that we only do it for the sake of the bonus."

Batmanov had been impressing upon the engineers all the way the necessity for hurrying out to the strait without wasting a minute. Musya Kuchina's bus, however, had apparently caught his fancy, for he had lingered there for the last two hours chatting with the drivers as they came in. His companions, for their part, feeling pretty chilled after the day's travel, were only too glad of an opportunity of sitting for a while in the warmth.

"Not for the sake of the bonus?" he queried in mock surprise.

"There are more important things than that. We are helping the front, Comrade Batmanov," Makhov answered gravely. "Solntsev has a pal fighting under Rokossovsky—he's driven the Germans away from Moscow. Solntsev has given his pal his pledge to raise his output lif-

ty per cent. He did even more than that yesterday."

"We've bucked up a lot ever since we heard the news about the victory," Solntsev said. "Comrade Kovshov's method, of course, has also been a great help. That's why we're making a better showing with pipe transportation, and you won't find any dropped pipes on the section now."

"It's Makhov's method, not Kovshov's," Alexei corrected the driver.

"So you think we shouldn't have introduced the bonuses," Batmanov said argumentatively, as though speaking to himself.

"I didn't say that," Makhov retorted. He spoke calmly and weightily. Batmanov regarded his earnest youthful face with sympathy. "Every one working in the taiga likes to get some attention." He stole a look at Musya and smiled. "These mugs of coffee have become a sort of output gauge with us now. We don't ask each other how many pipes we've transported, but how many mugs we've drunk." He eyed the girl again and added challengingly: "But even if Musya wasn't here with her bus we'd still be doing our level best!"

"Oh, so that's it," Musya said archly. "We shall bear that in mind, Comrade Makhov!"

"I knew that you weren't trying just for the sake of the bonus," Batmanov said gently. "Don't take offence at my words. And don't consider that as a bonus," he added with a nod towards Liberman's offerings.

The conversation soon became general, and the engineers questioned the drivers about the work and life on the section.

"But whose method of pipe transportation is it, after all?" Batmanov asked. "I've been told that you wished to keep it a secret."

"We're transporting by the new method and that's all that matters. What difference does it make who suggested it, after all," Makhov argued.

"Well, it's a success," Batmanov agreed. "If you don't want to speak about it you needn't —let the secret remain yours." He glanced at Musya. "I see another secret of yours."

Musya broke in.

"Let me tell you how it happened, Comrade Construction Chief. It wouldn't do to let you have a wrong impression of Makhov.... He tested out the method to make sure that it was right, but he thought it was too early to make it public. Just at that moment the engineer came down." She shot a look of annoyance at Kovshov.

"I don't need an advocate!" Makhov muttered in confusion, getting up and putting on his cap. "May I go back to my truck, Comrade Chief?" he asked Batmanov. "We've got two more trips to make."

"All right," Batmanov answered, also rising. "It's time we got a move on too, we've been Musya's guests too long. By the way, Comrade Makhov, I have a proposal to make. I'm going down to the strait, and I need men with grit out there. There will be a lot of goods that need transporting out to the island—it's a big and difficult job. I was thinking of transferring you to the strait. And Musya with her bus too. Have you any objections?"

They all laughed. Musya hid herself behind the counter.

"Musya's her own mistress, it's nothing to do with me," Makhov answered with a frown. "Personally I agree, if my consent is necessary. It's a bit tame out here now. Besides, it wouldn't be bad for me to part company with our chief Rogov. He's labelled me an 'individualist,' he can't get over the fact that I didn't come to him with my suggestion."

They went outside. The stinging frost took their breath away. Musya threw a pea-jacket

over her shoulders and ran out to the drivers with the tinned foods and chocolate they had left behind.

"Here's your advocate's fee!" Makhov growled, returning her the bar of chocolate, and stealing a glance at the construction chief. "You get back inside—the mercury has dropped to fifty below!"

Batmanov with the engineers and Liberman had set out on his inspection trip of the line immediately upon his return from Rubezhansk. They were awaited with impatience at all the sections. Problems were cropping up every minute in the complex organization which had to be settled by Batmanov, or by the engineers, or the supply chief.

Zalkind had accompanied them part of the way. He and Batmanov had gone into affairs at Section Three, and decided that Yefimov were best replaced by Temkin. That little man with the quiet voice was the real boss at the section in any case. Batmanov immediately signed the order appointing him chief. Zalkind took Yefimov back with him to Novinsk with the intention of restoring him to Terekhov, at the refinery.

Though besieged by the multitude of matters requiring his attention at the near sections, Batmanov never for a minute forgot about the distant sections which he was so eager to reach and where the state of things was a constant source of worry to him. There was a shortage of personnel everywhere, yet he did not hesitate whenever necessary, to transfer men to the strait for the building of the pipe crossing. He had ordered Nekrasov to turn over his work to an engineer sent from Novinsk to relieve him and to prepare to leave at once; he and Topolev would have to take charge of the gigantic blasting operations that were to be carried out on the strait. At Section Four Batmanov had ordered the Pestov brothers to join the group going out to the strait.

"If you wouldn't cling so much to the skirts of the Head Office you would always have enough personnel and everything else you need," he said in reply to Melnikov's protests.

In his haste to get to the strait, the construction chief was continually urging on his companions, refusing to allow them to remain in one spot for any length of time. They hardly had time to rest, for the affairs of each section where they stopped overnight engulfed them so completely that they found

it hard to tear themselves away the following morning. Were it not for the grim determination of Batmanov who inexorably pressed them onward they would have spent weeks at each section.

At Section Four Beridze's interest was keenly aroused by a proposal made by one of the local technicians to shift one small section of the line, and he wanted to stay on for a few days to survey the terrain for himself.

"But don't you see that we simply cannot afford to delay our journey," Batmanov argued with him. "You mustn't lose your head every time you come across something interesting.... It is not at all necessary for you to tramp all over the section just to verify the technician's proposal. They'll manage without you. We have to get to the strait, and we have no right to spend any time en route on anything but the most urgent and important matters."

Now and again, however, the chief himself departed from his stringent schedule. The life of the works' sections had an irresistible attraction for him too, and he found dozens of urgent and important matters to be attended to en route. Troubled by anxious thoughts about the strait crossing, Batmanov had visibly

cheered up at Rogov's section. Musya's jolly bus was not the only thing he had liked here—it was merely a detail in the general scheme of a well-knit and happily organized collective.

Batmanov, and after him, Beridze and Kovshov, had visited the section quite recently, and they were now struck by the amazing improvements they saw at every step. What delighted them most of all was that Rogov had succeeded in so short a time in transporting a considerable part of the pipes down the line and stringing out over a third of them. The line of pipes lay stretched like a black thread on the snow for many miles.

Batmanov and Rogov had not met since that memorable telephone conversation. They met now in the drivers' lodgings—a clean, cosy barrack with neatly-made cots, gauze curtains on the windows and mats on the floor. The house contained a separate wash room and a room for working kit. As soon as he entered it, Batmanov remembered Rogov's promise to make the place comfortable. Deep down in his heart he was very pleased with what he saw, although he grumbled and found fault.

"Obvious stage effects! Rogov himself doesn't show his nose, of course—he's too busy

behind the scenes I suppose.... I can imagine what these drivers' cribs look like ordinarily."

"You see them in their usual state," said Khlynov, Rogov's assistant. He had met Batmanov and his companions at the boundary of Section Five and accompanied them down here. "The drivers are very satisfied, they make it hot for anyone who dares to mess up the place. Musya Kuchina is their patron—she's terribly strict about cleanliness and comfort."

"But where's your chief all this time?" Batmanov asked, sitting down by one of the beds and turning back the blanket to see whether the sheets were clean.

"Here I am, Vasili Maximovich," Rogov responded quietly.

He had appeared unnoticed and was standing in the doorway. Batmanov's shrewd guess had hit the mark—Rogov had been from end to end of his section during the night and morning making preparations for the strict inspection.

"So the varnishing is finished?" Batmanov asked, stepping up to Rogov and peering into his face.

Rogov held his peace, not daring to deny what was to a certain extent true.

"Good morning, Alexander Ivanovich!" Batmanov said, holding out his hand.

Rogov squeezed the large hand of the construction chief.

"You look thin and rather seedy. What's the matter?" Beridze asked, shaking hands with Rogov.

"Oh, nothing," Rogov answered vaguely. His attention was all for Batmanov.

"He's been ill—caught a cold. Refused to go to bed, and went about with a high fever," Khlynov reported, evading Rogov's frowning look.

"Been ill?" Batmanov queried.

"Nonsense! Just a common cold," Rogov said in a tone of irritation.

"Don't worry," Alexei, standing next to him, whispered. "It's all decided—you're going with us."

Batmanov understood, if he had not heard, what Alexei said, and he shook his head.

"I don't know what to do now," he observed. "There's hardly any sense in dragging a sick man along. And I don't like the idea of abandoning the section. Will Khlynov be able to keep it going?"

"I'm as strong as a horse!" Rogov said with vehemence. "Khlynov will manage here,

I'll vouch for that. To tell the truth, I've already handed over affairs to him."

Batmanov waved his hand with an air of indifference.

"Oh, all right, get ready then."

"Very good!" Rogov rapped out. "Please allow me to take Polishchuk, truck drivers Makhov and Solntsev and dispatcher Musya Kuchina. They are very keen on going."

"On the contrary. Makhov, I believe, expressed a desire to part company with you.... Oh, well, let them come, if Khlynov doesn't object. They're his people now. Fix it up between yourselves. I also want to ask him to let the cook Nogtev and lumbermen Shubin and Fantov go to the strait."

"Khlynov and I have already agreed on that," Rogov said quickly. "Haven't we?" he asked Khlynov.

Khlynov smiled wryly.

"I suppose so." He exchanged looks with Kotenev and said to him in a low tone: "They're taking away our best men."

"Never mind, we'll manage," the latter reassured him. "Things are bad over at the strait, they need the hardiest men out there. Where can they get them if not from us?"

"I'll be expecting a complete report from you at headquarters as to the state of the section you have taken over," Batmanov said, looking at the big angular Khlynov with an appraising glance. "After that I'll sign the order for your appointment." Passing Alexei on his way to the door, he said to him in an undertone: "Ugh you, and your soft heart! Spoilt the whole show. We ought to have kept that pirate a bit in suspense, it would have only done him good!"

They proceeded on their way the same day. Travelling by truck was possible only as far as Section Seven. Snowdrifts had become more and more frequent on the ice road after the windy, snowy day. The trucks were compelled to make halts, sometimes for long periods, much to Batmanov's annoyance. At one spot the cars got completely stranded in the snow, and in the absence of assistance anywhere within call, had to be pushed along for several kilometres by their occupants.

The rest of the journey, all the way to the strait, was made in covered sledges. Batmanov's sledge, popularly dubbed the "flagship," rode in the lead. He lay in it alone, wrapped in a great sheepskin coat, and from time to time called out one of his travelling compan-

ions "for a report recumbent," as Alexei humourously called it. The rest of them travelled in pairs and beguiled the time in conversation and discussion. The journey was broken by halts at the sections and various places along the line at signals from the "flagship."

Alexei and Rogov shared the same sledge. They had contrived to ride together by a tacit agreement born of a mounting feeling of mutual sympathy.

"Alexei, you can't imagine how glad I am to be going out to the strait," Rogov said, pressing slightly closer to Kovshov lying beside him in the sledge. "Ever since I heard that you had left Novinsk, I was on pins and needles all the time, trying to figure out whether the chief would take me or not. Things are running smoothly now at my section, and it's become rather boring there. I want work, hard work that will keep my brain sizzling. I've long wanted to be with Batmanov, to see how he manages things and take a lesson or two from him.... Why is it he appeals to me so strongly? When you come to think of it he's always grumbling and finding fault, and making demands, and never has a good word to say!" There was a note of approval in Rogov's voice.

"You were pretty flustered when you met him at the drivers' lodgings!..."

"Yes, I was, but I don't know why. I'm a bit of a fighter myself. It's been a rule with me ever since childhood—I used to have scraps ten times a day. Yet I get weak in the knees in front of him! D'you remember the way he tamed me the first moment we met? I pitched in that time like your Siberian tiger. He spoke a few words to me, and the tiger turned into a kitten."

"My sympathy was all for you at the time," Kovshov said reminiscently. "I had handed him a report myself, asking to be released to go to the front. He's still keeping it in his safe. He brought it out once when I came in to see him, showed it to me and asked: 'Want it back?' Then he changed his mind and put it away again. 'Too early yet, let it lie here a bit longer,' he said."

"And I'll tell you another reason, Alexei, why I want to go with you. It's better for me to keep away from Novinsk for the time being."

Rogov's voice trembled. Alexei regretted that he could not see his face.

"Why do you have to keep away from Novinsk?"

"A few days ago I was at pretty low-water mark—kept thinking all the time of Olga, and that Khmara fellow. I was eating my heart out. And then I'd heard that you'd all left for Rubezhansk. I got into a truck and made tracks for Novinsk! Drove like mad for thirty hours without a stop.... But don't you spill this to the chief or I'm done for. You won't, will you?"

"Of course I won't. Well, and how did Olga take it?"

"I arrived at night. Serafima let me in, flung up her hands and got all in a fluster—you know what she is. I rushed past her and went straight to Olga, just as I was, in my sheepskin. She was in bed, not feeling well, and apparently miserable. My appearance didn't seem to surprise her—she was even glad, I think, at first. And when I saw her lying there pale, with sad eyes, I flopped down on my knees. I kissed her bandaged hands, and felt as though I was choking—with happiness and a kind of sadness. She was crying ... crying.... She clung to me with her wet cheek and sobbed like a child."

Rogov was silent for a minute.

"Well, go on," Alexei said.

"My joy was short-lived. She had simply, in a moment of weakness, been glad to see me, and I had thought it was something more.... Looking at us, Serafima was so affected that she began to bawl. Olga stiffened at once and asked me to go out while she dressed—and then she began giving it to me! 'What have you come running down here for? Who gave you permission?' 'My heart did,' I said. 'It's my biggest chief.' She looked me in the face, touched my forehead, and measured my temperature. 'Goodness gracious, thirty-nine and three!' She made me lie down on the sofa in Beridze's room and she and Serafima started nursing me. I was only too glad, as long as I was near her! D'you think it funny?"

"Not at all."

"I thought I heard you laughing up your sleeve."

"You're a queer fellow, Alexander! Well, what next?"

"That's all. I had to go." Rogov's voice sank. The memory was obviously painful. "She wouldn't have me stay at her place and didn't want to let me go back to my section. Said I was ill and must go to the hospital. I seized the opportunity when she wasn't about and cleared out...."

"Did you try putting it to her point-blank? Konstantin deceived her all round. And he died a dog's death. She was unable to conceal her aversion to him when she told me about it...."

"I told her—'I can't live without you. Kill me, if you want, but don't drive me away!'" Rogov said hoarsely.

He turned over and crushed Alexei with the whole weight of his body.

"You clumsy bear! What did she say?"

"Nothing.... She didn't say anything! She turned away as though something had frightened her. Stood there looking like a heart-broken child, and I didn't dare go up to her. Tell me, Alexei, what am I to do? I'd been waiting and waiting. There was something in the way before. Now she's banished that Konstantin from her heart. But she doesn't love me, she'll never love me!..."

"I don't think you understand her," Kovshov said after a pause. "Olga loves you, and will love you more and more every day. But she's the kind of person who feels she must come to you with a pure heart. Although she has done with Konstantin, her heart is still clouded, disturbed. Just think of all she has suffered. I understand her. She loved passionate-

ly, probably for the first time. Then she had to tear this unworthy love from her heart, fight to overcome it. She was drawn to him and repelled at the same time. Then she found out that he was at the front, and began to feel sorry for him. If she were weaker, less courageous than she is, she would look to you herself for comfort and support. But she doesn't want to do that—and that speaks a great deal for her. You must have patience, keep a hold on yourself, don't disturb her...."

Rogov hung on Kovshov's words, and his rapid breathing revealed his agitation. He seemed to be verifying his own doubts by Alexei's words.

"You're only saying that to comfort me!" he muttered through clenched teeth. "She told me at parting: 'Don't come down any more to see me. I'll write you if I need you.... Don't worry about me. Khmara doesn't mean anything to me. After what I have been through I have nothing more to fear....' In a word, she politely showed me the door...."

"No, you don't understand her! Believe me, I'm right. You are too blinded by passion to see things in their proper light."

"Enough, Alexei! You're a good pal, but I don't need your sedatives. Let's change the subject."

"By the way, I met Khmara in Rubezhansk," Alexei suddenly remembered.

"How's that?" Rogov asked in an indifferent tone.

"Ran into him by accident, while knocking about the streets. They're funny sort of streets there, you know, a kind of seesaw affair, up hill and down dale. He invited me to his place. I didn't want to go, but curiosity got the better of me—silly, of course. It happens that way sometimes—a person may be disagreeable, yet interesting...."

"I suppose he mentioned Olga again?"

"He said he likes her, and would pay court to her, but owing to his friendly feelings for me, he leaves her to my care." Alexei said this with a broad grin, and edged away discreetly.

"Your care indeed!" Rogov said in a half-bantering, half-threatening tone.

"I found Grubsky at Khmara's place. It appears they are old cronies—Grubsky worked in Rubezhansk at one time or another. He had come to Khmara to seek sympathy and lick his wounds. He didn't even condescend to look at me. Khmara rebuked me for the

rough way we had treated his friend. A man may have made a mistake, but that's no reason, he said, for kicking him out. I must say, though, that for all his show of sympathy towards Grubsky he did not appear to have much respect for him. When Grubsky went away he said to me with scorn: 'Down in the mouth! A real man ought to show his mettle when he's up against it.' "

"That's true enough," Rogov muttered.

"Yes, but you should have heard the tone in which he said it! In general, that visit only increased my aversion for Khmara. He made me welcome, treated me to wine and off-the-ration food, and suggested inviting some 'lady friends,' as he put it. He was surprised when I declined. Little by little my aversion grew to positive antipathy. Olga was right when she called him an empty person, for whom the petty joys of life were dearer than anything else in the world.... To put it bluntly he's rotten. It's a shame that such men have contact with good, decent people and contaminate them. Among the diverse photographs hung about the walls I was surprised to see—guess whose?"

"Olga's?"

"No, Tanya Vasilchenko's. I was so astonished that I couldn't refrain from asking him

what that portrait was doing here. He answered rather reluctantly and rather irritably: 'She's an old friend of Olga's. Went to school here, and was a frequent visitor at the Rodionovs. I made love to her, of course.' He let fall a cynical hint, and after that I couldn't stand any more of him and I went away."

"I'd like to meet that fellow, see what kind of a customer he is!"

"I think you'll soon have that pleasure. He said he's soon going out to Taisin with a geological party and will be in our vicinity. I wouldn't mind, though, if you met him somewhere in the taiga and knocked the stuffings out of him!"

"Wouldn't I like to!" Rogov said, clenching his fists.

A mighty strength seethed in him. He hugged Alexei and began mauling him until the latter cried for mercy....

The rear sledge was occupied by Filimonov and Liberman. Both being of ample dimensions, they were squeezed tightly in its narrow confines. Liberman tossed about and fervently wished the journey over and him-

self already at "the world's end." Ever since the party set out he had been harassed by an unaccountable sense of disquiet. He had done his best at the head office to beg off going on this trip on the pretext that he had to meet his wife and daughter, who had escaped from the Leningrad blockade.

The strain of being constantly on his best behaviour, imposed by the presence of Batmanov, his close contact with men he had barely known before and whose multifarious interests he had never imagined, the numerous new impressions and the vast scope of the construction which he had only now begun to fully realize—all this threw his mind into a turmoil. His world suddenly opened out and his own activities were revealed to him from an unexpected angle.

At Section Ten Batmanov quickly discovered the reason why this section was lagging behind the others. From the facts which he had gleaned he put his finger on the cause of the trouble, which was the inefficient work of the sections office. The people here seemed to understand the general situation and their own tasks, yet progress was hampered by red tape. Batmanov took advantage of the opportunity to draw Liberman's attention to

the fact that to receive a kilogram of nails, for instance, one had to carry on lengthy negotiations with several of the local executives, involving endless paper work. The department managers at sectional headquarters conducted a futile correspondence with each other on simple matters that could be dealt with promptly. Liberman saw here a reflection in miniature of himself and Fedosov.

"When did this mildew start to spread?" Batmanov asked at a conference of the section. "I was here not so long ago and didn't see anything of the kind."

They did not leave until they had reshuffled the staff and put everything in order. Long afterwards the head office men engaged in heated and lengthy discussion on the question of what a Soviet office and its personnel should be like. Liberman took no part in these talks, which touched him on the raw and rattled him. Alone, in the company of Filimonov he now attempted belatedly to express his own views. For some reason he took up the cudgels in behalf of the supply men, although no one had assailed them.

Wishing to provoke Filimonov, he began by declaring that engineers were in a privileged position not only at this construction job

but in general. It was easy enough to be an engineer, he claimed, engineers could always be assured of support, and they had their technical standards to refer to whenever they were in doubt.

"Now look at yourself, Engineer Filimonov, what do you have to worry about?" Liberman persisted. "You know that the truck has to be in working condition. It has to have fuel, and a competent man to drive it. And that's all. If you're not provided with all these things your trucks will stand idle and your work won't get done. But I have a million worries: I have to see to it that the people get the rations they're entitled to, I have to supply them with clothes and footwear and comfortable living quarters. And I have to get that food and clothing even if it kills me. It's the same with Fedosov. You can't work unless he gives you everything you need. You say it's his business to provide you with what you need, but how he gets it is no concern of yours."

This tirade evoked little more than a few interjections from the taciturn Filimonov. But from the tone of these remarks Liberman saw that he had succeeded in ruffling his neighbour's temper.

"If you supply men have it so hard why don't you change your occupation? Why don't you try to be engineers if you think we have all the gravy?" Filimonov grunted.

Liberman ignored the interruption and continued to pursue his point.

"Just because you engineers have such an easy time of it and because your rights are recorded in black and white from A to Z you get conceited and give yourself airs. Take that Kovshov, for example. Goodness me, he's just a youngster but to hear him you'd think he was at least a professor or a rabbi. He knows everything there is to know and he hasn't any doubts about anything."

"Engineer Kovshov's assurance comes from his convictions," Filimonov retorted with asperity. "He doesn't go in for subtleties, he acts openly without beating about the bush. I am certain that he never utters a falsehood and if he should, it would not be because he himself expected to profit by it. Why do you object to that? I'll tell you why. It's because that assurance and straightforwardness is just what you haven't got. Talking to you one always gets the impression that you're holding something back. No wonder so many people complain that you're difficult to get on with.

You simply can't help trying to throw dust into people's eyes, although there shouldn't be any need for it. Why must you always pretend that your work is so terribly important and so difficult, as if everybody else had it smooth sailing? Why must you always turn down every request, or if you do agree to give something you make a big song and dance about it first and end up by issuing half of what is asked for. Remember how Zhenya told you off at that meeting? Everyone agreed with her, nobody had any objections to what she said. It looks as if you really haven't got much love for your fellow men, you don't trust them."

"Goodness gracious, what accusations!" cried Liberman. "If I'm as bad as all that I ought to be persecuted."

"There's no need to go to extremes. Not all human behaviour is regulated by the criminal code. If that was the case you'd be talking to the public prosecutor at this moment instead of to me. For that matter you're not the only one, there are plenty of supply men like yourself. What I don't understand is why they are like that?"

"Yes, why?" Liberman exclaimed. Filimonov had wounded him to the quick.

"I suppose it is because they are so close to the material things, too close to property whether it belongs to them or not. The evil canker of bourgeois commercialism still lingers in some of our supply workers, and that's why it takes them longer than other people to get rid of the survivals of capitalism in their consciousness."

"Easy there about survivals and bourgeois commercialism! I cut my eyeteeth on supply work, spent my whole life at it, and in my own field I could rank if not with an academician then at any rate with an engineer. I learned all about my business long before you knew anything about engineering. I began at the age of ten. And now I'll never see forty-five again."

"In that case you ought to be celebrating your jubilee. Funny, but I don't seem to remember seeing any decree conferring decorations on supply academician Liberman."

"You haven't yet, but you will. Wait till this pipe line is finished, I'll get a decoration, mark my words. Goodness me, I'll see to it that I get one!"

"I hope you do! I shall be the first to applaud, although I never was an admirer of the intricate art of supply work."

"You've never worked in my field and so you don't know that you can't get along in it without a bit of clever manipulation. Batmanov knows that!"

"I don't believe it, nor do I believe that Batmanov shuts his eyes to your clever manipulations. I am certain that if Alyosha Kovshov were a supply man his methods wouldn't be yours."

"Gracious me, he compares me to his Alyosha Kovshov!" squealed Liberman. "Don't you go comparing me with him. His life from babyhood has been as clear as crystal. I heard him talk about it at a meeting once.... His father was an illiterate worker, but he saw to it his boy got an education. When Kovshov left school he went to college and from college to a construction job and he was already a somebody. His career has been as straight as an arrow: from the Young Pioneers to the Komsomol, from the Komsomol to the Party. Has life knocked him about as it has me? Did he have to slave for a merchant when he was a kid as I did, did he feel himself the lowest of the low, cuffed, beaten and cursed and with no right to open his mouth to complain? Did your Alyosha have to tramp about begging for

work, bowing and humiliating himself to his 'betters'?"

Liberman poured out all this with passion and bitterness. Filimonov said nothing. For the first time he heard this man talk about himself with complete candour and without his customary banter and buffoonery. Liberman too lapsed into silence, evidently ashamed of his outburst.

"Would you like me to tell you a little story," he said after a brief pause and in a calmer tone. "It was told to me by a man I once applied to for work. Shall I?"

"Go ahead."

"It's about a lad who came to a shopkeeper to ask for a job as a shop assistant. The shopkeeper examined him from all sides and said: 'What makes you think you would be a good shop assistant, young man? It's not easy work by far.' 'What's difficult about it, sir? I've seen other shop assistants at work and I don't see that it's so hard.' The boss, who had been looking out of the window, said to the lad: 'Can you see what it is coming down the road there?' 'Carts of some kind,' the boy replied. 'What sort of carts? What are they carrying? Suppose you run out and take a look.' The lad ran out and

came back panting. 'It's some peasants carrying a load of oats.' The boss brightened. 'Where are they taking it to?' 'I didn't ask them. Shall I go and find out?' 'Of course. But you'd better hurry, they've gone quite a distance.' The lad ran out again. He came back all perspiring. 'They're taking the oats to Popovka village.' 'Did you ask them why they are taking it there?' 'No, I didn't. Shall I go and find out?' 'By all means. Only they're out of sight now.' 'That's all right, I'll catch up with them.' By the time the poor lad came back he was nearly dropping with fatigue. 'They're taking it to Sizobrukhov, the merchant, to sell.' 'How much are they asking for the pood?' the boss wanted to know. 'Oh dear, I didn't ask them.' But this time the lad didn't offer to go and find out. So the boss said: 'You'd better find out what price they're asking.' What could the poor lad do but run after the carts again. It was a long time before he returned. At last he arrived all worn out. 'A ruble a pood,' he said and dropped down with exhaustion. 'Do you think they'd let me have their load if I offer them an extra ten kopecks the pood?' asked the boss. But one glance at the boy showed him that it was no use. The boss then called in his

senior shop assistant. 'Some carts just passed this way, Timofei. Do you happen to know what it was?' 'Of course, sir,' replied the assistant. 'It was a load of oats the peasants were taking to Popovka to Sizobrukhov, the merchant. They're selling it for a ruble a pood. But they agreed to let us have it. I took the liberty of offering them an extra five kopecks a pood. They're on their way back to us already.' 'You see,' the boss said to the lad. 'You'll never make a good shop assistant.' I would advise you to take up engineering. Anybody can do that, even Filimonov learned to be an engineer!"

Filimonov laughed heartily at this sally.

"An amusing story," he admitted "I wonder, comrade academician, whether that lad who failed to pass the test wasn't yourself by any chance."

"No, comrade engineer, that wasn't me. Gracious, if it was, Batmanov would have some highly-skilled engineer on supply work and the folks out on the works' sections would go barefoot and hungry...."

Beridze and Topolev, who found themselves together in the same sledge when the

party set out from the section where they had last spent the night, rode for a long time in silence. The only sound in the sledge was Kuzma Kuzmich's laboured wheezy breathing and Beridze's occasional humming of snatches from a song about the Baikal Lake. Hitherto intercourse between the two engineers had been limited solely to matters concerning their work, and on all such occasions Kovshov had been present.

The sledge jolted over a hole in the road and the engineers bumped against each other. As the odour of snuff emanating from the old man's whiskers assailed his nostrils, Beridze laughed and said:

"Well, that's drawn us closer, Kuzma Kuzmich. Don't you think it's time we broke the silence? There doesn't seem to be any more reason for us to fight shy of each other. What do you say?"

"You're right. To tell you the truth, there never were any weighty reasons."

"There was one reason before—Grubsky. Not a very weighty reason, if I may say so, to have held you in sway.... Tell me, don't you feel sorry for him? After all, he put a lot of work into the project, and suddenly to find himself thrown overboard...."

"No! He's a pitiable object now, true enough, but I don't feel any pity for him," Topolev answered firmly. "I experienced his influence on myself—I was, as you say, under his sway. I'd give a prize to anyone who could explain such characters as Grubsky's to me."

"Try it yourself and save your money," Beridze advised. "You have the leisure for it just now, by the way."

"Do you mind if I take some snuff? I'll do it carefully, so's not to get it into your eyes. I have a craving for it."

"You're as much the boss in this dark apartment as I am, Kuzma Kuzmich."

Topolev charged his nose with a pinch of snuff. Beridze gave a hearty sneeze.

"Aha, you got it!" the old man laughed. "Now then, if you care to, let's try to get to the bottom of that complex phenomenon—my former patron—together. You agree that it is a complex phenomenon?"

"Of course."

"Maxim Gorky,"—Topolev uttered the name with profound respect,—"had good reason for making such a passionate appeal against philistinism. The dreadful power of philistinism consisted, in particular, in an

odious preference for tranquillity and inaction. Grubsky is something like that. He should have lived in England, where everything stands motionless for ages—a sort of huge stagnant pool covered with green slime.... If the fat reference books which regulate Grubsky's activities were suddenly to disappear, he would probably die of heart failure. Of course, he knows a good deal, he has picked up a lot during his years of engineering, but he believes only in what is written in foreign books and in some of our own, and what has a hundred times been confirmed by established authorities. He followed them reverently until one fine day he found himself with them in a quiet shady backwater, and there he stayed. He is alien to innovation and daring, and creative initiative on anyone's part simply irritates him.... Now I understand why he met the left-bank idea with such sarcasm and arrogance. It was before your time—I have in mind the proposals made by the line workers—Karpov and others. He treated Tatyana Vasilchenko's initiative the same way when she urged at all conferences the building of a temporary telephone line."

"Didn't you know what sort of person Grubsky was before? Or was it that you understood him and merely put up with him?"

"I didn't understand him as I do now that I have escaped his influence. I confess—he did for a time drag me into his putrid backwater. It makes me sick to remember it, but it was I who answered the proposals from the line workers at his dictation. And it was I who failed to support Tatyana Vasilchenko, though I realized that she was right."

Beridze could tell by the old man's voice that he was distressed, and sought to reassure him.

"You shouldn't fret about it. You're now investigating a complex phenomenon that's passed into oblivion."

"I'll try," Topolev said. "Of course," he went on, "by no means everything about my former patron appealed to me. But the idea of opposing him, let alone rebelling against him, never occurred to me. We have known each other, by the way, for a quarter of a century, and he called our long-standing relations a 'silver' friendship. Can you imagine how painful it is for me to think of this 'old

crony'? One of the ancients said: 'Stagnancy is death.' Grubsky, in fact, is a dead man, a living corpse. My rule in youth was a different one—away with stagnancy and routine, give us restlessness, activity, something new every day! You are to me the living antithesis of Grubsky, and I'm glad that I'm with you at last. Glad that I'm going out to the strait, glad to be up and doing. Take Grubsky—he would never have gone himself, nor would he have let me go. D'you know, it's painful to admit it, but I wouldn't have asked to go either—why go to such a distant, chilly place full of inconveniences and worries, when you can sit at home in the warmth and quiet. But something of you has passed over to me, and I simply cannot endure to stay indoors these days. The desire to feel things with my own hands, to see for myself how the pipe line will be laid in the strait, has become a need with me.... I suppose I sound ridiculous, Georgi Davydovich?"

"I'd like to shake your hand, only it's hard to do it here," Beridze said earnestly.

"Listening to me somebody might shrug his shoulders," Topolev went on, after a minute's pause, "and say the old fellow's mak-

ing much ado about nothing. There's no such problem in our country! Our whole social system stands for creativeness against stagnancy. That old cuss wants to involve us in his subjective emotions! I answer my imaginary opponent—quite right, our social system is against complacency, stagnancy and vegetation—it stands for life. But the problem I have mentioned nevertheless exists. Now you have just said, by the way, a phenomenon that has passed into oblivion. Are you so sure? There are many different people living in this country—millions of them! And the career of each of them is unlike that of any other. A man is born, he lives, is educated, but what he will be depends upon a multitude of circumstances.... Is it because I'm sixty that these questions stir me—an old specialist, so to speak, full of survivals of the past? Fiddlesticks! I'm not old at all!"

"Bravo!"

"Yes, yes, I repudiate this old-fashioned notion of age! This problem would stir me no less if I were forty years younger. Grubsky is younger than I am, but he wouldn't understand me if I were to tell him all this. A person of Komsomol age, say, can also fall under the sway of false conceptions. Imagine Grubsky's

son, the cast of mind he will have, if he has followed in his father's footsteps. Haven't you met young people who are complacent and self-satisfied to the point of nausea? When a person of that sort graduates university, receives an appointment, and becomes a family man, he is deeply convinced that he has attained the peak of achievement. No far-reaching perspective—Alexei and I have coined that phrase—no far-reaching perspective glows before a man like that, he sets himself no further aim. He suffers himself to be carried along with the tide, the general current of life. The current is a powerful, magnificent one, there's no denying it, but how can a man remain unperturbed when among those who are doing their utmost to accelerate that movement there are people who are just drifting along by inertia? Everything that is volitionless is liable to become stagnant, and, that which is stagnant becomes a drag on the general movement...."

The sledge train came to a sudden stop. From the front sledges came the sound of laughter and voices. The "captain" of the "flagship" had taken to stopping the caravan

like this in some of the wildest and most deserted parts of the taiga. He got out now to stretch his legs and his travelling companions followed his example. Emerging from the dark, covered vehicles, they were blinded by the bright sunshine and the dazzling white snow. Batmanov liked the wintry landscape of the Adun and he never tired of admiring it.

"Rather monotonous this unrelieved white, don't you think, Vasili Maximovich," Beridze commented with the deliberate intention of starting an argument. "When I look at this drab landscape I cannot help thinking: Oh, to be in the Caucasus where every inch of ground is a riot of colour, and what glorious colour! No one can help pausing to admire!"

The others came up, all except Liberman and Filimonov who were engaged in a snow fight some distance away. The supply man looking like some grizzly bear in his long flowing robe bore down heavily on his opponent.

"Don't you agree, Alexei, that the scenery here is rather drab and dreary? Especially in the wintertime when there's simply nothing to relieve the eye," Beridze persisted

with a sly wink to Alexei in appeal for support.

Support came from an unexpected quarter. Topolev, who had little taste for the Siberian landscape, remarked seriously:

"The flowers have no scent, the birds can't sing." This was not true, but Topolev had heard someone say so and he now repeated what he had heard. "No, Nature here is much too grim and chilly for my liking. I am an admirer of our Smolensk landscape and I always shall be."

Beridze nudged Alexei delightedly with his elbow.

"Aha! That's torn it. Now for the counter-attack!"

Sure enough, Batmanov throwing aside his cigarette, was off on his hobby horse:

"You're all blind! Health resort habitues: 'Oh, the Caucasus, ah, the Caucasus!' Don't slander Mother Nature, she's lovely everywhere. You only need to be able to see her beauty and appreciate it. From now on I am going to introduce a rule: every two hours I'm going to haul you out into the frost and make you gaze for a whole hour on Dame Nature until you begin to perceive her charms."

"Oh, I have already perceived them!" Beridze laughed.

"Look at that sunset," Batmanov said in a peremptory tone. "See, the sun has already gone, it is behind that tall hill over there. But the glory of its presence still lies over everything. You can see its magic touch on the snowy canvas before you. How can you fail to admire that fading light against which the hills are now silhouetted? If our chief engineer were capable of understanding anything but a blueprint he would see those thick firs over there and the way the snow rests on their branches as on the palm of your hand, and there, look at the molten gold of those sunbeams filtering through the snow!"

Beridze gazed in admiration at Batmanov standing there tall, broad-shouldered and handsome in his white sheepskin jacket and fur cap, with the sunset reflected in his grey eyes.

"Why, you're an artist, Vasili Maximovich!" declared Topolev. "Anyone who can perceive beauty in Nature to which others are oblivious is an artist."

"You mean that our chief has shown us something that does not actually exist?" Alexei egged on the old man.

"No, I meant nothing of the kind, and please don't misconstrue my words!"

"Don't pay any attention to those wiseacres," Batmanov advised the old man. "That hill over there is a picture in itself. It seems to be all of one colour, yet what a wealth of tones and half tones it has. The dull gold of the peak turns to a pale lilac further down which deepens to a rich purple at the foot. Did you say something about drab colour, Comrade Beridze?"

The latter threw up his hands in their huge fur mittens.

"I surrender, it was there a moment ago but it's gone now, damn it."

"And now shift your shortsighted gaze to the Adun," Batmanov ran his eyes over his companions and let them rest on Liberman who was panting heavily after his tussle with Filimonov. "What thoughts occur to you when you look at the river?"

Liberman turned his large crimson nose in the direction of the Adun and shrugged his shoulders:

"Thoughts? A big river. Frozen over."

"That's all?"

"That's all. Goodness gracious, what else?" Blinking his rime-coloured lashes innocently

and blowing on his frozen hands, Liberman added with a touch of irony: "Ask me something about supplies, Comrade Chief, that's more in my line."

Everyone laughed.

"And what do you say?" Batmanov asked, turning to Alexei who was gazing fixedly at the river. "Do you mean to say the sight of the frozen Adun evokes no thoughts or feelings in you?"

"It does," Kovshov replied gravely. "What has always struck me about a big river in wintertime is its utter immobility. I have always wanted to detect some traces of the struggle the river fought before succumbing to the power that subdued it."

Batmanov was obviously much pleased with this answer.

"Quite right! I have found at least one man with taste. If you look closer you will see how bitterly the Adun fought! See that ice jutting out wildly on the river? That is petrified movement. You see before you a grand battlefield on which two elements were locked in mortal combat." He turned his gaze beyond the river. "Where will you ever see forests like that? In the Caucasus? There was once a forest right here where we stand,

but it retreated. But over there it stands at the very brink of the river as much as to say: 'I have relinquished the left bank to you, roam there at will, but this is my kingdom, keep out!' "

Beridze smiled into his moustache. Batmanov was quick to notice it.

"There's nothing to grin about," he said with mock severity. "Severely practical people like you are apt to see the living forest as so much firewood, poles or planks. But there are people who on the contrary look at poles and planks and see the green woods alive with sound."

"I shall take your remark as an order: from this date I will stop regarding the forest from the standpoint of firewood and planks. I shall make a point of admiring it. May it stand there in peace for another five hundred years!"

Alexei shook his head.

"You disagree?" Batmanov queried.

"Yes. I am not willing to let the forest stand there in peace for another five hundred years," replied Alexei. "In that forest the bear is master. I am for a different sort of landscape. I shall never forget the scene Rogov showed us at his section."

"What was it you showed them, Rogov?" Batmanov's curiosity was aroused. "Some more of your tricks, I'll wager!"

Rogov smiled. But Alexei went on before he had time to reply:

"He showed us the lights from the construction line on the Adun and the lights on the left bank section. A dawn like that at midnight is something to look at!"

Batmanov threw a look of approval in Rogov's direction, but with his customary severity grumbled aloud:

"He was wasting his time! There isn't anything that can move the crusty soul of an engineer."

"Well, here is one crusty old engineer's soul that has been moved," remarked Topolev with a smile. "I confess I never expected to discover such refined artistic tastes in my chief."

"Let me clear up the mystery," said Beridze with playful malice. "Our chief has dabbled in art from boyhood. I was once fortunate enough to see some of his landscapes. And one day I actually caught our chief in the act of daubing paint on canvas. I was so amazed that I still remember that painting to the minutest detail. It was an

autumn scene. I remember a few golden-leaved birches on a rock. They looked as if they had wandered from afar and had been rooted to the edge of the cliff in fright. There was nothing else—not a bush in sight, only the rocky hills rising darkly in the background, with the pale cold sky above them." Beridze laughed. "You see, Vasili Maximovich, how faithfully I have reproduced your landscape, and you scold me for being impervious to Nature's beauty."

"I don't scold you enough, that's obvious," retorted Batmanov. "Now then, get into my sledge. I'll have a few things to say to you that might teach you not to gossip about your chiefs!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KARPOV JOINS THE CONSTRUCTION

As HE sat in his sledge watching a russet ray of sunlight filtering through a small hole in the roof, Batmanov's thoughts were busy with the work ahead. The hours spent in travelling from section to section afforded him a rare opportunity for solitude which he habitually had to deny himself. At this point it was necessary to give careful consideration to the condition of the construction job as a whole. Batmanov recalled his recent talk with Pisarev and Dudin. Stalin had compared the construction job to a battle of strategic importance. This was something to be pondered over again and again.

Especially disturbing and recurrent were his thoughts about the strait. Batmanov ran over in his mind the men he had sent out there. A special committee had selected the

workmen for that section, and when Kovshov had reported to him about them that day, Batmanov felt easy in his mind as far as the workmen were concerned. The personnel department had assured him that the administrative and executive staff sent out there were also of the best. Of that he was not quite so sure. He did not have too much faith in the judgment of his personnel department, whose employees were sometimes apt to lose sight of the living man in dealing with questionnaires and service records. He had never seen Merzlyakov, the section chief, but he had heard good reports about him from the personnel department. Grechkin, on the other hand, emphatically denied those reports: "You can never be sure of that Merzlyakov, he's mostly interested in his own welfare. I'm positive we'll have to kick him out. Mark my words...." Engineer Kotlyarevsky had been sent out to the strait only recently. One did not quite know what to make of him, although, judging by his questionnaire, he had worked at two big construction jobs. Now, in Pankov, Batmanov had implicit faith. He had come to know the man quite well during their journey together along the line. Pankov was his own age, a comrade of Zalkind's in

the partisan movement, a man who had been through the hard school of struggle. Batmanov had actually felt a load taken off his mind when Pankov, in taking leave of him, had said that he was going at once to the strait. But how to account for his silence? What had happened to him out there? Batmanov had told Pisarev the truth when he said that it was impermissible to deal only with one section to the exclusion of all else. The work season at the strait section had set in only now. The main tasks, of course, had not been neglected. As for the rest, it was not too late to mend things and make up for lost time. It was inconceivable that Pankov had accomplished nothing at the strait.

The construction chief was disturbed by Umara Mahomet's report. The men at the section were at sixes and sevens. They did not know where they stood, and were vague as to why they had been sent to "the world's end." Apparently Pankov had not been able to cope with the situation. It would be necessary to set things in order there at once and introduce iron discipline. Living conditions would have to be seen to—that was where Liberman would have to display all his energy. This section would be a test for his best qual-

ities. You can stand on your head, my dear man, but you've got to make these people feel that they're being properly taken care of!

To raise the morale of the men—that was the main thing. It was a pity Zalkind had not been able to go to the strait. Had they heard about the victory at Moscow out there? Batmanov's thoughts cleared at the recollection of the first big victory in the war. Pisarev had told him about it in detail. He had said that the defeat of the Nazis had frustrated the plans of the Japanese. If the Germans had succeeded in taking Moscow the Japanese would have attacked us. "Keep your eyes open," Pisarev had warned him, "don't take things easy, be constantly on your guard. The Japanese are greatly interested in our pipe line. They may have their agents on the island and at the strait."

It amazed Batmanov that Stalin had found the time to give attention to the report about the pipe line construction at a moment when the terrific battle for Moscow was raging. Not a single battle at the front or in the rear was fought without Stalin's participation—his genius inspired every general and soldier of the fighting army, every leader and worker of the labour army. At the end of August, before

the construction chief had left for the Far East by plane, Stalin had also found time to receive him. Before dismissing Batmanov, Stalin had told him what he had probably told other industrial commanders. He had said that it was necessary to wage a ruthless struggle against people infected with peacetime moods, to fight these moods in oneself and in others, wherever they might reveal themselves. Men of such temper would maintain that the pipe line cannot be built even in three years. Stalin had made it incumbent on Batmanov to go into that matter himself. Go into it, and build the pipe line in a year. The leader held out his hand to Batmanov and concluded the interview with a phrase that often afterwards rang in Batmanov's ears: "I wish you success, Comrade Batmanov!"

Deeply stirred by these reminiscences, Batmanov could almost feel the vigorous handshake of the leader. "We shall make it a success, Comrade Stalin, no matter what obstacles we may meet!"

Batmanov stopped the sledge train at a spot that was familiar to him. His fellow travellers got out of their sledges and stood

speechless with amazement. Batmanov regarded them with a look of triumph. They stood on the bank of the Adun, with their backs to the river. A deep depression, resembling a huge white bowl, fell away from their feet. It was dotted all over with large black patches, and smoking. Curling white wisps broke from under the snowdrifts and rose to the pale-blue sky. It seemed as though the snow were lifting, drawn upwards by some strange magnetic force. The wind slightly stirred these delicate white wreaths, revealing as through a patterned tulle curtain, glimpses of a large village—Lower Sazanka.

"Wonderful!" Alexei exclaimed. "These are hot springs!"

"And what springs!" Batmanov said with as much pride as if he had discovered them himself and they belonged to him. "In time this spot will be one of the finest health resorts in the world. These waters are better than the Caucasian springs—hear that, Comrade Beridze? Highly radioactive, rich in mineral salts, surface temperature plus ninety degrees. That's some water for you!"

"Pity such good stuff is going to waste," Rogov observed.

"They're not altogether wasted, as you will soon see!" Batmanov retorted.

They went from one hot spring to another. The base of the spring made a dark hissing and boiling patch in the snowdrift from which a pillar of steam rose in the air. They stood for a long time gazing at this scene, so unusual amid these winter surroundings.

Suddenly Karpov appeared from behind the springs. He made a general bow, like a dignified host welcoming his guests, then shook hands all round. His preoccupied face cleared when it came to Beridze's turn—the fisherman recalled their meeting during the blizzard.

"How d'you do, Ivan Lukich, how d'you do, my friend!" Batmanov said, shaking hands. "We've come to pay you a visit."

"Welcome," Karpov said, bowing again.

"Show them, please, how you've harnessed this subterranean heat to man's service. It's a useful thing for the engineers to see."

"It's nothing much to boast of," Karpov said, although he felt flattered by the visitors' interest.

At his suggestion, the collective farmers had boxed up several of the springs situated nearer to the village. The hot water was collected in

wooden pipes and run down to the hothouses and used also for heating the villagers' homes. It was hot under the glass roofs of the hothouses lying buried in the snow, and vegetables on the long shelves—radish, lettuce, cucumbers and tomatoes—were a riot of growth. The visitors' eyes gleamed at the tempting spectacle, and they partook of the fresh vegetables with relish.

"Tropical summer in the midst of all this frost and snow!" exclaimed Beridze, gazing about him with delight and munching a cucumber. "You're a magician, Ivan Lukich!"

Karpov disclaimed credit for these achievements.

"My father is in charge of the hothouses, he's our agricultural expert," he said, and introduced the guests to a taciturn old man, the regular features of whose shaven face greatly resembled those of Karpov's. "We feed the children and the sick with fresh vegetables all winter. We have enough left over to sell to the neighbouring villages. Our chief occupation, of course, is fishing, but agriculture gives the kolkhoz quite a decent income."

After the hothouses had been inspected, he conducted the guests down the village. Sturdy log houses lined the street, with a

schoolhouse and a library in the centre. Behind the cottages could be seen well-built outhouses and the fences of large kitchen gardens.

"Our village, my lad, is nearly ninety years old. My grandfather and his mates were the pioneers," Karpov said with pride. "They came out here from Trans-Baikal, looking for a better life. Grandfather didn't live long enough, but my father has lived to see Socialism!"

The visitors looked in at some of the houses. There were hardly any men to be seen—many had gone to the front. Of those who remained, some were out fishing under the ice and the others had gone with a sledge train of fish to the district centre. Batmanov, who was visiting Lower Sazanka for the second time, greeted the housewives and the children like old acquaintances, and showed his companions the central-heating pipes in the houses.

"They have electricity here in the summer," Batmanov said. "Ivan Lukich has fixed up a little power station on the local stream."

"Ivan Lukich is a man of all trades. He acts as doctor here too. You go and see old Trifon, he'll tell you some marvellous things," one woman said.

"I took some of our water down to Novinsk and Rubezhansk to get it analyzed," Karpov explained a trifle apologetically. "They told me it was a good cure for rheumatism. Old Trifon has been a sufferer for a long time, so I persuaded him to take a water cure. It helped, and now others are using it. Rheumatism is a common ailment among us fishermen. So now first thing they do when they come home from fishing, is to take a hot foot bath in spring water."

The inhabitants of the village accorded Batmanov and his companions a sincere, though somewhat guarded, welcome. Their glances and conversation concealed an unspoken question: "What has brought you here, good people? Is it merely to look at us and show yourselves?"

"Notice, Karpov doesn't invite us to his house," Alexei whispered to Beridze.

It was some time before Karpov at last, and with evident reluctance, led them up to his own house. He opened the front-garden gate for his guests, and followed them into the house. His face had clouded. His wife, a big-boned young woman with bright hazel eyes, met the guests with marked unfriendliness and avoided her husband's eyes. Two

little girls, aged four and six respectively, sturdy and quick-eyed like their mother, hid behind her skirts.

Glancing at the freshly whitewashed walls and ceilings in the rooms, and the white floors carpeted with spotless mats, Beridze praised the cleanliness of the place. The hosts said nothing. Conversation flagged. Batmanov called the little girls over to him and gave them some chocolate. They nestled up to him trustfully.

"Will you come with me to build the pipe line?" he said to the girls, glancing at their mother. "You'll ride about in motorcars and make explosions in the strait. You'll have great fun!"

"Their father'll be enough for you!" the mistress flung in sharply. "He can go and build your pipe line without them."

"Katya!" Karpov said sternly.

"Don't you try to shut me up! You're not the master in this house any more, if you can desert it.... I can't show my face in the village, everyone ohs and ahs at me: 'Your Lukich is crazy to run away from here. He was the first man in the village, and no one has ever done him a wrong. And how will you manage here by yourself?' You ought at least

to listen to your father, Karpov! Doesn't he bid you to stay here?"

"You're not right, my dear woman," Batmanov said. "Ivan Lukich is going out to an important state construction job where he will be of great use. It's not a whim of his. . . ."

"And isn't he doing good work here?" the woman now shouted. "Doesn't the front need fish?"

"Stop it!" Karpov said, losing his temper. "You know perfectly well that I have arranged it all with the kolkhoz management and trained a man to take my place. Things are running quite well in the kolkhoz. . . . Besides, I can't help going out to the construction job, it's got hold of me. I shan't forgive myself all my days if I don't go!"

"Go then, who's keeping you! I'm not scared of staying behind by myself—I've got a pair of hands, I won't get lost! Only let me tell you this—better you had gone to the front instead, then I wouldn't be ashamed to face people!"

Karpov rose in anger. The guests got up too.

"I'm very sorry, Comrade Batmanov and all you other comrades, that you've been

given such a reception in my house," he said in a jaded voice. "Let us go to the kolkhoz office." Karpov turned to his wife and looked at her reproachfully. "You'll be ashamed of yourself afterwards. You have disgraced me before these good folks!"

They found Karpov's assistant and several other men in the kolkhoz office. Among them were Karpov's father, and another old man, a fisherman named Zobnin. They began speaking about the latest news from the front, and Zobnin enumerated the enemy casualties and the trophies captured by our troops at Moscow, in the Yelets district and at the taking of Kalinin.

"We can breathe easier now," Zobnin said.

They also discussed kolkhoz affairs. At last Batmanov said:

"So you are letting Ivan Lukich go with us?"

"He may as well go. The management has decided to release him," the new chairman of the kolkhoz answered. "The general meeting also decided not to detain him, seeing he is so keen on it."

"We can't hold him back, but we're sore at him all the same," Zobnin added "And we're sore at you for enticing him away."

"Look you, Ivan, you had better not come home after this, my lad. I'll drive you out just the same," Karpov's father said grimly.

Ivan Lukich said nothing. He merely shrugged his broad shoulders.

An hour later, as though in a hurry to carry him off, Batmanov's sledge train drove out of the village. The new recruit lay alongside Beridze in gloomy silence. Beridze understood his feelings and made no attempt to draw him into conversation.

Karpov broke the silence himself after a while, saying with a sigh:

"It's hard, my lad. I feel a weight on my heart, as though I had parted with my comrades and my family for good."

"Do you regret what you've done, Ivan Lukich?"

"That's not what I meant. I can't keep away from the construction job. I'm fond of engineering, and if I get the chance after the war I'll go to Rubezhansk to study! I see my place in this construction job, my lad. I can just imagine how life will develop on the Adun when the pipe line is laid and the road to Novinsk is opened up! Mark my words, Georgi Davydovich, our Lower Sazanka will be a famous health resort in ten years or so.

People will come out here from all parts of the country to enjoy the scenery and gather new strength!" He had already recovered his spirits and began speaking with enthusiasm about the future of his village and the Adun as he imagined it.

The sledge train overtook Tanya Vasilchenko and her team almost at the very strait. Ever since Batmanov and his companions had left Novinsk Tanya had been closely following their progress down the line. The wire was at her command, and she knew everything that was going on—that the new project had been endorsed, that Batmanov had taken Rogov and Karpov with him, and that the construction chief was in a hurry to reach the rémote sections where the situation caused him considerable anxiety.

Tanya had spoken several times to Beridze, Kovshov and Topolev over the selector during their halts at the various sections. Batmanov had called her up twice himself. He had enquired how many kilometres of wiring she had left to do, and told her to look out if he overtook her before she reached the strait. There remained a mere sixty kilometres to be

covered—her assignment was as good as fulfilled, and Batmanov's threats no longer worried her.

Batmanov and his fellow travellers had last spent the night at Section Ten. Tanya had received information from there as to when the sledge train continued on its way, and she and Smirnov went out on skis to meet it.

It was a bright sunny day, and the sparkling rainbow-tinted snow dazzled the eyes. The snow-bound taiga, melting, as it were, under the sun, became alive with faint murmurings and rustlings and some little birds actually began to sing.

Tanya went at a swift pace, and Smirnov, on his long legs, was hard put to it to keep up with her. She was in blithe spirits, she smiled and hummed a tune to herself. A delicate wisp of vapour in which breath and song were mingled broke from her rosy lips. Tanya had not seen Beridze since that memorable hour when she had sent the engineers packing and afterwards eaten her heart out thinking that they had perished in the blizzard. The thought of seeing them soon elated her, and she admitted to herself that she would not mind even if Beridze renewed his ardent courting. She was also eager to see

Alexei and Topolev, and Rogov, and even Batmanov, of whom she was really a little afraid. They all seemed so near and dear to her, almost as dear as her own kin.

When they reached the river Tanya and Smirnov paused. The bank at this spot was high and dropped steeply downwards. Smirnov was the first to descry the dark speck of the sledge train amid the snowy wastes. Waiting until it had come up close, Tanya pushed off with her ski poles, body bent low, and glided down amid a cloud of snow spray. Smirnov dashed after her with a wild whoop.

They swept out under the nose of the leading horse, which snorted in terror, tossed its head and jibbed. The train was thrown in disorder, and the back sledges ran into the front ones. Tanya and Smirnov laughed heartily at the sight of the occupants tumbling out of the sledges like so many sacks and blinking dazedly in the brilliant sunlight. When their eyes had got accustomed to the light they crowded overjoyed round Tanya. Beridze was so delighted that he could only stand admiring her, strangely timid and silent. Tanya kissed Topolev, and whispered into his ear in triumph:

"Well, granpa? Isn't Beridze a brick—wasn't I right?"

"You were, Tanya, I confess it," the old man responded in the same conspiratorial whisper.

"Any news from Volodya?" she asked quickly.

"I haven't heard anything for a month. I'm worried."

Liberman came down on Tanya, pushing Topolev out of the way. He wiped his lips with his mitten and flung out his arms.

"Well, well, whence this beautiful maiden with the crimson cheeks and crimson cap! Lovely queen of the woods!"

"Still the same, perky beyond your years," Tanya said, evading his embrace and shaking his hand. "It's a very good thing that they've dragged you out into the world at last."

Batmanov, too, crawled out of his sledge, interested to know why they had stopped and what all the noise and laughter was about. He came up and when he saw Tanya, his greeting was like a bolt from the blue.

"How d'you do. I'm not glad to see you. Not at all glad."

"How's that, Comrade Chief?" the girl said, nonplussed. She could not make out whether he was serious or joking.

"Your wire ends here, I take it? The line doesn't go any further, does it?"

"Not yet, but it's only sixty kilometres to the strait."

"Have you forgotten our arrangement? I shall need the telephone at the strait section as soon as I get there. You're going at a snail's pace, my dear girl!"

Tanya maintained a resentful silence. The smile faded from her face, she lowered her head and restrained the sharp retort that sprang to her lips. Liberman, behind the chief's back, clutched his head and muttered:

"Gracious me, what a way to treat our proud little Tanya!"

Beridze took the girl's part.

"That's an unfair reprimand, Vasili Maximovich. Tatyana Petrovna and her team have established a record in wire suspension. No machine could cover the ground faster."

Batmanov regarded him with an amused smile.

"You're a champion and knight-errant, Georgi Davydovich!"

Liberman laughed out loud, drawing Batmanov's attention to himself.

"And what's tickling you? Mind your laughter doesn't turn to tears when you get to the strait!"

Alexei who had been chatting with Smirnov a few yards away came over to Tanya and sought to comfort her.

"You shouldn't take his words so much to heart. D'you remember what we said about kind chiefs who haven't a good word even for those they love? You should have laughed it off, that's all."

"Oh, I have no use for those kind chiefs of yours! You don't know what to say to them!" Tanya answered tartly.

Topolev was genuinely sorry for the girl. He took a pinch of snuff, wiped his moustache with his red handkerchief, and resolutely tackled Batmanov.

"Why did you hurt her?" he said reproachfully. "She's had a trying enough time as it is. Think what a rough time she's had to bring the wire all the way out here.... Everyone greeted her so nicely, and you had to spoil it. You might have gone for me, if you must take it out on somebody!"

Batmanov glanced at the old man with curiosity, then his gaze shifted to the gloomy Beridze, to Tanya and to Alexei whispering

into her ear, to Karpov and Rogov standing slightly apart, to Smirnov who calmly met his gaze, and to Liberman who was trying to look unconcerned. Without answering Topolev, Batmanov commanded:

"To horse! Enough of these civilities out in the frost—you'll catch cold!"

The head office men took kind leave of Tanya and went back to their sledges. Beridze still stood looking wistfully at the girl.

"Do you also want to go for me, Comrade Chief Engineer?" Tanya asked with acerbity.

He moved away, gloomier than ever. Tanya looked at his retreating figure and bitterly regretted that she had hurt him. She would have liked to call him back and tell him how, day and night, she had looked forward to this meeting. Mittens and caps were waved to her from the sledges. Liberman sang out:

"Ta-ta, sweetheart! I kiss your little nose!"

Tanya turned on her heel and said to Smirnov:

"Come along, Kolya."

They started climbing the steep snowy bank. Batmanov watched them for a moment from his sledge, then called out:

"What's your hurry, Comrade Vasilchenko? Come back, come with us. Here, get into

my sledge! And you, Comrade Smirnov, go back to the team and get finished with that accursed wire. I'm taking your chief as a hostage. I shan't give her up to you until you hand me the wire at the strait. Get me?"

"I get you!" Smirnov answered gaily from the slope. "It'll be done!"

Alexei drew a breath of relief and got into the sledge together with Beridze.

"How d'you like that? I knew all the time he would take her with him."

Beridze made no reply.

"What's bitten you?"

"Oh, nothing, Alexei, leave me alone, please!" Beridze said grumpily.

Batmanov threw a sheepskin coat over Tanya and bade her wrap herself up in it well. Tanya drew the sheepskin about her and moved away from Batmanov as far as the sledge permitted. She lay without stirring, waiting for the inevitable conversation to commence.

A ray of light fell through an aperture in the sledge covering. Batmanov watched with a smile as it played on the girl's face. Now it had fallen on her pink nostrils, her

small straight nose and pouting upper lip, curled in a hurt childish expression The sledge jolted, and the ray of sunshine flitted over her whole face, covered with a deep, almost chocolate-coloured tan. It illumined the wisps of soft dark hair that had escaped from under her knitted cap, the lobe of the ear and her neck, with the red scarf at the throat.

Batmanov smiled to himself at the remembrance of how his fellow travellers had taken Tanya's part half an hour ago. "Can't they see that I'm no less a friend to her than they are?"

"Well, young lady of character, are you still angry?" Batmanov broke the silence.

"The chief has a right to issue reprimands. It is not for me to be angry!" Tanya said drily, in a tone of faint irony.

"You can't take such a chill, formal tone with someone lying beside you, even though he were the People's Commissar himself," Batmanov observed.

Tanya sensed the undertone of amusement in his voice and hastened to protest:

"Do official relations change with the mere accident of travelling facilities? What difference does it make whether I'm standing

before you in your private office or riding with you in a sledge?"

The sledge jolted again and Tanya's elbow came into contact with Batmanov. She swiftly drew back. Batmanov could barely suppress a laugh.

"There is a difference between an office and a sledge, there's no getting away from it! So you are not angry with me? Then why are you so upset? You're not afraid, are you?"

"Afraid? Of what?" Tanya's embarrassment was disappearing, and she felt more at ease.

"Obviously you don't know what to expect from me. You consider me a rough, ill-conditioned fellow. And you're thinking—what will the others in the train think of me? What will the boys and girls think about me when Smirnov tells them all?"

"I'm quite capable of standing up for myself if a rough man insults me," Tanya said coolly. "I'd be fully entitled to disregard his rank. Kolya and the others will not think anything bad of me."

"Why not?"

"They are good people and they have a good opinion of you and me. I'm not sure about Liberman, though. He's the kind of

man who's likely to suspect the worst. But he won't say anything—rather, they won't let him."

"Out of respect for you or for me?"

"Out of respect for both of us. Out of a pure-minded attitude towards women."

"How can you tell that?"

"A woman always intuitively feels a man's attitude towards her."

"I see. Is there anything else you want to say?"

Tanya laughed.

"Perhaps, but I don't intend to defend myself against your accusations."

"Why?"

"A subordinate mustn't judge his superior, so I shall abstain."

"Never mind, you have my permission."

"You run down yourself and other people for some reason or other."

"Why should I do that, do you think?"

"Apparently it's your character and your method. Alexei Kovshov tried to comfort me a while ago. He said: 'There are some kind-hearted people who are unable to squeeze a gentle word out of themselves and prefer to scold people.' He calls your habit of admonishing and scolding people 'stern love.' "

"H'm, the psychologist! He thinks he's very clever, knows everything. I'll show him 'stern love'! A fine reputation he's creating for me!" Batmanov said in mock indignation.

There was, however, a note of genuine annoyance in his voice. Tanya's words, conveyed from a third person and uttered in a mocking tone, had nettled him.

"You gave me permission to pass judgment on my superiors," Tanya reminded him.

"I gave you permission, but not him. He'll hear from me about this...."

There was a long silence.

"Very well. Let us assume that your chief is a soft-hearted fellow and that is why he has told you so many unpleasant things," Batmanov took up the thread of conversation again. "Out of the fullness of his heart the chief took you into his sledge, sat you next to him and started an argument on abstract topics in order to dispel your ill humour. But what if all that is utter nonsense and your kind-hearted chief has certain feelings for you he wishes to confess?"

Tanya moved away sharply.

"That is absurd, Vasili Maximovich! I am not unaware of your true feelings.... You see, I happen to know that you are in

trouble just now. Please don't make light of such things!"

He made no reply. Her words had embarrassed him deeply. There was a prolonged silence.

"All right, we've cleared everything up," Batmanov said at length with a sigh. "Now report, or rather tell me how you've been getting along all this time. I visited your team and saw a good deal for myself, but I didn't have the chance to speak to you in private. I'm interested to hear what you yourself think of your work with the young folks."

He asked permission to smoke. The warm pleasant smoke of his cigarette was wafted to Tanya. When Batmanov drew at his cigarette a reddish glow lit up his large face and his eyes gazing upwards.

Many of the youngsters had enrolled as linemen without realizing the difficulties that faced them, Tanya told him. They had looked upon it at Novinsk as something in the nature of a lark, and upon Tanya as a sort of Young Pioneer leader. Two or three days had wrought a complete change in their outlook. After the familiar conditions of town life they had found themselves in the taiga,

thrown practically upon their own resources. Many of them had taken fright—it had seemed beyond their powers of endurance to live and work out in the frost all the time, and Tanya, their leader upon whom their fate now depended, had not enjoyed their confidence. Some of the young people fell into a mood of apathy and dejection, others gave way to tears and begged to be allowed to go home.

It was well that she had not started arguing with them or humouring them. She had found within herself the strength to be stern and exacting.... "Cold, you say? When you get used to it you won't feel it. You don't think we're going to build a warm house under every tree, do you! Hard? There's a war on, and it's still harder out at the front! Besides, who said that we Komsomol members have the right to demand an easy life! You've never done this kind of work before and don't know the trade? All right then, go ahead, and work, and learn while you're working!" This was all very well, however, for the time being—but it was mere words. Kolya Smirnov came out with timely advice: "Let us back up our words by deeds, by personal example." And they both began carry-

ing on as though the cold meant nothing to them. They proved to the youngsters that they could dispense with mittens—the hands merely grew red and chapped, but got used to it. Strange to say she had not caught cold or even been frostbitten, whereas Kolya had been ill and had his cheeks frozen.

"That's interesting," Batmanov said. "The hands get used to it, you say? Mine always freeze, for some reason. Give me your hand."

He found her small, hot, roughened hand with its hardened skin and calluses. He took it quickly and let it go as quickly. Whether this was a handshake or merely a gesture of curiosity, it was impossible to say.

Tanya went on with her story. The column of linemen had to be broken up into teams, and the wire suspension process divided into separate operations. This simplified the work and they made better progress. Each worker quickly got used to his job and specialized in it.

"Grubsky was waiting all the time for experienced linemen to be sent down from the centre," Tanya said. "Ridiculous man! If it hadn't been for him the telephone line would have been up long ago. I can't make out such people—how can the earth hold them!"

"I don't know about the earth, but our construction job's not holding him any more," Batmanov answered. "You got the better of him, forget him—touch not the dead!"

Tanya was eager to explain to Batmanov why the wire had not been stretched all the way to the strait and why the chief had succeeded in overtaking her at this spot. They had failed because of the blizzard. It had come down suddenly and played havoc, tearing down the line in various places for several kilometres at a stretch. After the blizzard was over they had had to turn back and do half the work over again instead of hurrying on to the strait. In addition, several boys had got lost in the blizzard and strayed in the taiga for nearly four days before they were found. It had taken a whole week to nurse them back to health. If it hadn't been for the blizzard the wire would be at the strait by now.

"Don't excuse yourself," Batmanov said gently, and suddenly stroked her head with a fatherly gesture. "Despite the habit you have ascribed to me, I'll take advantage of the darkness and tell you a kind word—you have done your job splendidly. You have accomplished more than could be expected. When the teams come to the strait we shall

reward them with official commendation. It will be the first order of its kind on this construction job. Are you satisfied?"

The flitting ray of light helped him to see the girl's beaming face. In her elation Tanya spoilt everything by ingenuously exclaiming:

"You really are very kind, I could kiss you!"

"Now, now, don't swing from one extremity to the other like a pendulum!" Batmanov growled. "D'you think I'm taking you along with me to pay you compliments? You've successfully tackled the first part of the problem—good for you. But a second task confronts you, technically much more difficult. I mean crossing the strait to the island. It means laying a submarine cable under the strait, do you understand?"

He paused in an expectant silence. Tanya did not respond. She was thinking not of the new problem, but of the man who was now talking to her. Stalin had indeed chosen the right man to send out here to the construction job!

"Why don't you answer?" Batmanov asked. "Has the submarine cable scared you?"

"No, I'm not scared," Tanya answered quickly, coming out of her reverie. "We'll

lay the cable, I've already been thinking about it and have discussed it with Beridze and Kovshov. We have a plan of action. We're going to lay the cable simultaneously with the pipe line. I'll take my bearings on the spot and then make you a full report about it."

"All right. If you like I'll tell you how I intend using the wire you have put up."

"I'd like to hear, of course, though I think I know what a wire is used for."

"You don't know anything. It's not quite the usual purpose I have in mind."

He began telling her with animation about his plan to introduce a regular dispatcher service throughout the construction line. The head office and he himself must know and see everything that was going on at all times at any section of the line. One could not rely on casual telegrams and sporadic phone calls. There would now be a dispatcher at every section and every important point along the line—not simply a complement to the selector apparatus, not a technical unit, but an experienced efficient person who sees everything and knows everything. A new high post was to be established, that of the chief dispatcher, to whom all the dispatchers along the line would be subordinated and who himself would

be subordinated directly to the construction chief.

"Grechkin?" Tanya asked.

"Yes, I'm going to appoint him chief dispatcher," Batmanov confirmed. "Every department chief, whether he likes it or not, will have to come to the selector telephone at a definite scheduled time and speak to his people at the sections. Kovshov will speak to the construction foremen, Filimonov to the mechanics, Liberman to the supply service staff. When it has become a habit, something like one's daily meal, people will wonder how they managed to get along without it before!"

Batmanov had already introduced that system at the near sections. It had not been popular at first. The department chiefs and their subordinates along the line were puzzled: "Why come to the phone at a fixed time whether you have any questions to take up or not?" Batmanov persistently argued: "If you have nothing to take up with the line then you don't know what's going on there. All the more reason why you should show an interest in what your subordinates are doing, keep in closer touch with them!"

Tanya had heard about this, but only now was the whole idea of Batmanov's innovation

made clear to her. She knew of his fondness for the selector telephone. The latter stood on the construction chief's writing desk and was never switched off. No matter what he was doing, Batmanov always listened to the voices of the construction line, heard constantly day and night. Anecdotes were told about how he had cut in upon somebody's profanity over the wire, countermanded a wrong order someone was giving and burst out laughing on overhearing a witty comeback. It was pleasant for the communications staff and for Tanya herself to know that their chief had such a penchant for the wire.

"Do you know Pankov well?" Batmanov suddenly asked. "What is your opinion of him?"

"I know him very well. He is a great friend of my family He and my father fought the Japanese and the Whiteguards together. I have a great respect for him," Tanya answered. "Sidorenko, the old construction chief, and Grubsky didn't like him for his bluntness. He had a row with them every day, in particular over the question of a temporary telephone line. Pankov was the only person who supported me in this matter."

"When did you last see him?"

"That day when you and he visited our column. Pankov wanted to take his son, little Genka, with him, but Genka wouldn't go. Remember, how you laughed when you heard him declare importantly that he was at work and could not leave his comrades in the lurch. The boy's also looking forward to meeting his father at the strait. Why did you ask me about Pankov, Vasili Maximovich?"

"I'm worried—there is no news from him. Not a word since he left for the strait. And the position at the strait is serious. Could I have been mistaken in him?"

They fell silent again each occupied with his own thoughts. Their frank talk had drawn them together, and these pauses no longer disconcerted Tanya. The gentle measured swaying of the sledge made her feel sleepy, and, tired out after her day's activities, she dozed off. She had not slept for more than twenty minutes when Batmanov woke her.

"Tanya, are you sleeping?" he asked. She awoke with a start of surprise to hear him using the familiar diminutive of her name. "Don't you dare sleep. I never sleep in the daytime myself and I don't let anyone else do it. Let us return to abstract matters....

You were right in snubbing me when I let my tongue run away with me.... I was a fool for allowing my feelings get the better of me and now I am paying for it...."

Tanya guessed what he was about to say and she too felt heavy-hearted.

"I don't know whether you have had any painful emotional experiences or not. I doubt it, your face is too serene and unclouded for that.... I have been giving considerable thought latterly to what we call our private lives. With us work takes first place, of course. But a person who has nothing besides his work is not fully alive." Batmanov spoke in a calm even voice as though thinking aloud. "It seems to me that a great deal depends on how one begins one's life, whether one starts out with a real, genuine passion. You know, there are people who have never really loved and who do not know what it means. They don't even believe that there is such a thing, they believe it exists only in books." Batmanov pressed his hands together so violently that the joints cracked. "Forgive me for speaking about this. But you are a grown-up person, even though you are just beginning to live. And it is far better to look boldly at all the ugly sides of life than to prudishly

avert one's eyes. It is very bad when people come together without love. It is because of this that trivial, false relationships spring up between men and women Sometimes cynicism sets in at an early stage.... Why do you sigh, Tanya? Does it hurt you to listen?"

"Don't ask me," Tanya replied hoarsely.

Huddled up, she was thinking at the moment of her past acquaintance with Khmara. Fortunately it had broken off in time. Khmara's crude courtship had repelled her.

"Yes, it is not easy to listen to what I have to say," Batmanov agreed "But life gives us many painful burdens to carry. Here I am tormenting myself in a vain effort to understand why it is that my own family life has not been a happy one. After all, I did love Anna, I believe. She was the sister of my best friend, and everyone told us that we would make a splendid couple and advised us to marry. We did so. For a time there was just the two of us, then our son was born. Everything seemed fine on the face of it: a perfectly happy family, whose only trouble was that the child was not as healthy as he might be. You might think that I would have no cause to reproach myself. Yet here I am

racked with pain [redacted]bitterness because I have realized that although I lived side by side with my wife and child, breathed the same air as they did, I was nevertheless a stranger to them. Anna Ivanovna once spoke to me about that. She did not exactly reproach me. She is a clever woman, a fine woman, but she treated me with too much deference and humility. One day she mustered the courage to say to me: 'Vasili Maximovich (yes, she didn't even call me by my first name, and I felt that was as it should be), Kostya and I miss you. Though you live with us we see so little of you. We can't go on like this, we beg you to give us more of your time. Perhaps you could arrange for us to go away somewhere together, just the three of us, so that you could get used to us again.' I was shocked by what she said and for the first time it dawned upon me that there was something wrong with the way we were living. As it happened I had just completed the job I had been working on and I was given a leave of absence. I went with her and the boy to her native village in Byelorussia. There was nothing to distract me there, no work, none of my friends—just my wife and son and the serene Byelorussian landscape. I took

my easel along and some books on art—a hobby of mine from my youth...."

A sigh escaped Batmanov in spite of himself, and that sigh pierced Tanya like a knife-thrust.

"Now I recall that vacation in the village with the deepest pleasure, but at the time.... I couldn't stand it for long, one month of life in the village wearied me. What did I lack? I think it was the absence of work more than the lack of entertainment that bored me. After the turbulent life on the construction site it was hard to be content with the tranquillity of domestic life. I sighed with relief on receiving an urgent summons to Moscow.... Anna did not utter a single word of reproach but I am sure she knew that I was glad to get away.... But all that happened a long time ago. I saw them for one brief day in the Crimea before I came here. And that was all...."

"You will find them, Vasili Maximovich, I am sure of it!" Tanya said fervently.

"No, I shall never find them now. My boy is dead. And I don't know how Anna and I will ever find each other again. I am afraid she will not come back to me.... Now, tell me why is it that one begins to appreciate what

is most precious only after it is lost? Whenever I am alone I remember thousands of little details of our family life. How could they have imprinted themselves on my mind when I seemed totally unaware of them before?"

Tanya bit her lips in silence, fighting back the tears. She feared that this man with his proud, complex nature would be ashamed of his frankness and try to cover up his confusion by saying something mocking and bitter.

"You are twenty-four I think, aren't you, Tanya?" Batmanov spoke again. "I advise you from the bottom of my heart to be circumspect in your personal life. Let what I have told you be a warning to you.... True, Zalkind once told me: 'One day you will compose your own song.' Yes, but it's hard to begin life all over again at the age of forty-three!"

The ensuing silence was more than Tanya could bear. Fortunately for her the sledges halted at that moment. The conveyance ceased swaying, jolted once or twice, creaked and came to a standstill. They had arrived.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SO THIS IS THE WORLD'S END!

THE ADUN was left behind. This was the second day Batmanov and his companions were travelling over Merzlyakov's area—the last works' section on the mainland. Beyond that lay the strait, and there, at last, the Island of Taisin.

The headquarters' men got out of their sledges ever more often and covered long stretches on foot. The nearer they drew to their goal the more apparent did it become that this section was lagging far behind the others, although it should have been in the lead, seeing that it stood beyond the precincts of the Adun and had not suffered the dislocation caused by the shifting of the line.

There was a good deal at the near sections which had gladdened the eye—the winter road with its strings of trucks and horse

trains, the little blockpost houses, the settlements, the pipes lying in stacks and strung out, and the bustling activity of thousands of men. Here there was nothing of the kind: only a clearing in the taiga, and here and there evidences of an attempt to build a motor road. The only visible structures were several roughly-built sheds intended as stores, but even these were empty. The people here apparently had not yet started to transport foodstuffs, pipes, materials and equipment from the strait to the interior of the mainland.

"The section is dead and deserted," Batmanov said, worried and indignant. "Where are the men we sent out here?"

Within several kilometres of the strait, the line took on a somewhat different appearance. They came across a winter road, in a sad state of neglect and almost unfit for motor traffic. Warehouses cropped up more frequently, a few barrack dwellings, and here and there small groups of men leisurely and listlessly engaged in clearing passages. Snow-covered trucks were sighted on the road, some carrying loads, others empty, and here and there pipes appeared—sometimes piled in stacks, but for the most part thrown about in disorder.

Batmanov gave orders for the party to leave the sledges and continue the rest of the journey to the strait on foot to enable them to make a detailed inspection. Topolev alone kept to his sledge, where he lay covered with three sheepskin coats. Tanya ran ahead on her skis, reconnoitring the locality to left and right where her wiring team would shortly be working. Batmanov and the rest of the company looked in at the warehouses and barracks, counted the pipes and questioned the men they met. They stopped at each stranded truck along the road, and Filimonov inspected it and jotted down its number with a note as to the condition he found it in.

One such truck held up the party for a considerable time. Loaded with pipes, it stood in the middle of the road, blocking the way. The driver was pottering round it. Scowling darkly, he viciously untied the trailer pins with the intention of discharging his cumbersome load right on the spot.

"Name?" Filimonov asked curtly. He and Alexei had come up to the truck first.

"Smorchkov," the truck driver answered just as shortly, jumping to the ground.

"Smorchkov?!" Alexei echoed in astonishment.

The engineers exchanged glances. So Smorchkov had reached the strait! Had he succeeded in bringing his truck to Chongr, or had he left it somewhere on the Adun and come out here on foot and been given a new truck? The fact remained, however, that Smorchkov was on the spot. Something had happened to him, though. Haggard, his face covered with reddish stubble and his eyes sunken and inflamed, he bore little resemblance to the trim, buoyant youth whom the engineers had seen off from Start.

"What's the trouble?" Filimonov enquired, leaving other questions for afterwards.

"Engine's out of order."

"Tried to start it and nothing doing?" Batmanov said, coming up. He, too, had failed to recognize the driver.

Smorchkov looked at the group round him and turned away.

"I've tried a hundred times."

"What do you think of doing now? You'll freeze, man!"

The driver shrugged his shoulders and answered apathetically:

"Maybe another pipe carrier will come along, and give me a lift back to Chongr."

"Then what are you unloading the pipes for?" Beridze interposed. "They've got to be transported further out, haven't they? Besides, if the car is out of order what difference does it make whether it's loaded or empty? How do you explain your actions?"

The driver smiled wryly and said nothing.

Batmanov asked Filimonov to try and start the motor. Filimonov busied himself over the engine with a concentrated air, and after several minutes he got it running. All the men put their shoulders to the truck and helped to move it.

"What do you have to say for yourself now?" Batmanov demanded angrily of the driver, when Filimonov, without switching off the throbbing motor, climbed out of the driver's seat. "Do you realize what you're doing?"

Smorchkov muttered something under his breath about maintenance repairs on the line being no good.

"Why lie about it!" Filimonov cut him short. "The truck is in good order, it's brand new!"

"What sort of man are you? Are you Russian?" Batmanov demanded, staring hard at the driver.

"Can't you see I am?"

"Not yet. Where do you come from?"

"I've been transferred here from a road construction job. I hail from the Oryol district.... What are you questioning me for? Don't you recognize me?" Smorchkov retorted in a tone of annoyance that had a hint of defiance in it.

"Have you got anybody in Oryol?"

"My parents were there. I don't know if they're there now. I don't know anything any more!"

"I wish your parents could see you now, the way you're acquitting yourself here! It would be worth writing the old folks about their fine soul..."

Smorchkov stood with his face averted. He looked a stricken figure in his padded jacket that hung loosely on him.

"Why don't you say something?" Batmanov persisted, beginning to lose his temper.

"What do you want of me?" The driver looked Batmanov full in the face. "I'm not doing my level best, that's true. It's too late now! What if I do manage to lug another dozen pipes from place to place—who needs those pipes of yours? It's all a farce!"

"Can you make the fellow out?" Batmanov asked Filimonov.

"Blest if I can! What's the matter, man, explain yourself! What are you driving at? What's the reason for all this pessimism?"

"Explain? Perhaps you can explain!" Smorchkov shouted in a cracked voice. He tore the cap from his head, tossing loose his dishevelled hair."I've been hauling these here pipes and thinking: where am I carrying 'em to, what for? I could have killed myself for a damned fool! What was the idea in sending me out here, Comrade Chief? I imagined I was doing something important! D'you remember seeing me off, Comrade Filimonov? I drove my truck hundreds of kilometres without sparing myself. Have you seen the road from the Adun? There isn't any road! Yet I brought my truck to the strait, dragged it out almost on my back. And delivered my freight to destination too. What for? What for, I ask you?"

"It's needed, Comrade Smorchkov. We greatly appreciate what you have done," Batmanov said in a calmer tone. He had recognized the driver and was beginning to catch the drift of the latter's incoherent tirade. "But this section here seems to have played

the devil with you—and we can hardly be grateful for what it's done to you."

Smorchkov stared at the construction chief in amazement.

"What's the matter with you people, I can't make you out! D'you mean to say you intend going on with the pipe line? The Germans have taken Moscow, they say, and the Japanese will be here any day now. What's the sense in wasting all this labour? Tell me better what to do, where to go to fight the Japanese?"

"You're clean crazy, my lad!" shouted Karpov.

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed Liberman.

"Who told you that nonsense about the Germans taking Moscow?" Batmanov asked, eyeing Smorchkov compassionately. "And how could you believe it?"

Rogov lurched towards the driver.

"Ugh, you—call yourself a man! You're a jellyfish, that's what you are, Smorchkov! 'Moscow taken, Moscow taken!' How can you repeat such nonsense? All the drivers along the line are talking about you, and here you've gone and knuckled under.... And you're supposed to be a Russian! If your mother heard you just now she'd disown you!"

It looked as though Smorchkov was going to strike Rogov. But instead he looked suddenly at the faces around him with a brightening eye and the ghost of a smile lit up his features. His unshaven scowling face cleared.

"Is that true, what he says? So Moscow is ours? Comrades—tell me! We've been going through hell's torment here, not hearing a single good word!" Smorchkov's ringing voice had a catch in it.

"It's true, lad! The Germans have taken a beating at Moscow. The Red Army is driving them back," Beridze said.

"That's great news! The real stuff!" Smorchkov stammered. He suddenly roused himself and dashed to his truck, pulling on his cap and gauntlets as he ran. The man was transfigured. His movements were brisk and resolute.

"Unload the pipes and come back to the headland. Hunt me up at the section—we've got to have this out! You're not going to get off with it so easily for getting panicky!" Batmanov shouted out to him.

Smorchkov smiled at him from behind the wheel.

"I don't mind, Comrade Batmanov! I'll take whatever's coming to me, any reprimand

or punishment. I'll make good, you'll thank me yet!" He cried above the roar of the motor. "There won't be any need to jog me on now, everything's clear!"

The truck jerked heavily into motion and sped down the road at a good pace. Batmanov watched it disappear.

"Things must be in a bad way at the strait, Vasili Maximovich," Alexei said in a tone of concern.

"Looks like it. Anyway, we're here at last."

They had not gone half a kilometre when a passenger car came racing towards them from the direction of the strait. The section chief, Merzlyakov, and the works' superintendent, engineer Kotlyarevsky, forewarned of the arrival of the head office representatives, had come out to meet them. Kotlyarevsky, a tall thin man with a small face on which a pair of horn-rimmed glasses looked disproportionately large, held a brief case and a roll of drawings in his hands.

"D'you intend making your report out here in the frost?" Batmanov's voice was icy as he glanced at the brief case and passed on.

Merzlyakov, a man of squat build with a broad face nipped crimson by the frost, fell

into step with Batmanov's loping stride and began hastily reporting about the blizzard which had been raging on the section for ten days and had swept up huge snowdrifts. Things were only just beginning to get back to normal again.

"Where's Pankov?" the construction chief demanded, interrupting the flow of his speech.

"A misfortune has occurred—he's disappeared.... Got lost," Merzlyakov answered quickly, in a rather guilty tone.

"Got lost?" Batmanov stopped, dumbfounded. "What d'you mean?"

"Yes, lost, Comrade Chief. He reached our section in the night. He was very upset, and went for me straight off.... He had met a man on the way—a man from Umi Bay—we've got fifty men out there and a base. During the navigation season they unloaded three steamers with supplies...."

"What's all this got to do with Pankov? What are you jabbering about?"

"The man Pankov met told him a tale of woe about the people starving out there. So Pankov made up his mind to go out there straight away. I told him there wasn't any road and he'd better wait, things weren't really so bad at the base. But he wouldn't

listen. He went out on skis the next morning, and that's the last we saw of him."

"Why did you let him go?"

"What could I do? He came here as head office inspector ... I warned him ..."

"Why didn't you send out a search party?" Batmanov's words dropped mechanically, but the main thing was clear to his mind—questions would not help Pankov now.

"But we did! We searched high and low but couldn't find him. No wonder, in these wilds!"

Merzlyakov began speaking again of the blizzard, about the rigorous climate and the section's isolation from the rest of the world.

"If you insist on talking out in the frost, tell me more definitely what's going on at the section," Batmanov muttered through clenched teeth.

His heart contracted with bitterness and regret. Pankov, strong and resourceful, stood before his eyes. Batmanov thought of Genka —could it be that fine boy was now an orphan? He glanced at Tanya, then looked away quickly. Stunned by the news, the girl stood biting her lips and her face was contorted.

Merzlyakov began reporting about section affairs, Batmanov continually interrupted his report, a thing he rarely did.

"What about the building of the winter road? Failed?"

"I must confess, Comrade Chief, we didn't invest enough effort into it," Merzlyakov meekly concurred.

"How many pipes have you got at the section and where are they distributed? What have you got ready for shipping out to the island? What materials are you short of?" Batmanov rained his questions.

"What stocks of foodstuffs have you got in the warehouses and at the supply stations?" Liberman threw in.

"Just a minute, I'll tell you—I've got it all written down," Merzlyakov said with an obliging nod, undoing his coat.

"Never mind that, you'll catch cold. You ought to memorize such things so that you know them by heart. How many pipe carriers have you got in working order?"

"How many pipe carriers have we got in working order?" Merzlyakov repeated the question to Kotlyarevsky, who was trailing at his heels. "He looks after the technical

side of the business, Comrade Construction Chief, I try not to interfere."

"More's the pity!" Batmanov snapped. "We don't give any bonuses for non-interference. You answer then, but don't open your brief case!" he threw over his shoulder to Kollyarevsky.

The latter blew his nose in a rumpled ball of a handkerchief and reported in a catarrhal voice.

"We have seven pipe carriers running, twenty are frozen. The road is not in proper shape yet and the trucks behave badly in these winter conditions. There are several more trucks out of commission and in need of repairs."

"Tell me, Merzlyakov, how do the drivers behave in these winter conditions?" Beridze asked from behind.

"The drivers are all right, more or less," Merzlyakov answered, glancing back at the chief engineer. A truck was heard coming up the road. It was Smorchkov returning to the section after having unloaded his pipes. He was about to pass the pedestrians when Batmanov motioned him to stop.

"How's the road, Comrade Smorchkov?" he asked.

"I got through. It's snowed under in parts, but I'm an expert at tackling any kind of road! At one spot the men helped me, shovelled away the snow. They were surprised. 'Still transporting pipes?' they asked me. I told them the news you brought, and you should have seen how they bucked up! The road needs clearing. Even I won't be able to go beyond fifteen kilometres with a load of pipes."

"How's your truck? I've been told the machines behave badly in winter conditions. Is that so?" Beridze asked.

"I shouldn't say so," the driver said with a grin, patting the warm bonnet of his truck. "They're jolly good machines. It would be a shame to run 'em down!"

Batmanov regarded Merzlyakov with a frown.

"You go on by car to the section with the others," he said, turning to Beridze, "and take him along with you"—this with a nod towards Kotlyarevsky who was still blowing his nose. "He'll infect me with that cold of his. See that you fix Topolev up at once in warm quarters. I'm afraid this journey might be too much for him."

"What about you, Vasili Maximovich?"

"I'll take a stroll with Merzlyakov. I rather fancy he hasn't been over his section of the line for a long time."

The head office men clambered noisily into the car and Smorchkov's truck and drove off. Batmanov and Merzlyakov strode after them down the soft road. The construction chief eyed his companion with distaste.

"I was told at Novinsk that you are not to be trusted. Merzlyakov, what do you say to that?"

"What can I say, Comrade Construction Chief," Merzlyakov said, taken aback. "There are scoffers everywhere, men who say all kinds of things behind your back because they daren't say it to your face."

"Do you know Grechkin? You could hardly say he wouldn't dare to tell you what he thinks of you to your face."

"I've met Grechkin, but I don't quite know what kind of man he is. I didn't take a fancy to him either. He puts on airs, if you ask me. But I don't know him intimately."

"But he knows you! He told me the proverb: 'Beware of the goat behind, the ass in front, and Merzlyakov from all sides.' I'm beginning to be afraid of you myself, Merzlyakov. What other surprises have you in

store for me?" Batmanov waited for his reply, but received none. "Everything is at sixes and sevens. The men don't know where they stand. Panicky rumours and moods are rife! You've lost Pankov!" Batmanov went on acidly. "I haven't seen yet what's going on at the strait, but I've been nearly all over your part of the line on foot. It's a jungle! The trucks and tractors are standing idle, and we've written you a hundred times and dinned into Kotlyarevsky's head before he left headquarters that you should go ahead transporting pipes, materials and foodstuffs. Transport like blazes, while the winter lasts! It'll be too late when spring comes—the ice road will melt, and you can't make a summer road at one go! I'm certain that you haven't made preparations for shifting out to the island. I'm certain that Kotlyarevsky hasn't done anything to get work under way at the strait. Why, it's a threat to the whole construction job! What's been going on here, why are things in such a state? I saw nothing like it anywhere along the line! I didn't expect to find things shipshape, but I didn't expect to see such a mess. Are conditions here worse than anywhere else? They're not! You've been given plenty of people, provided with all the

necessary supplies, and the section hasn't had to be moved. Yet your section of all others has fallen down on the job!"

Merzlyakov, scared by the gravity of the chief's accusations and the tone in which they were uttered, hastily began making excuses.

"It's a hard job, Comrade Construction Chief. I've never been up against anything so hard! It's the effects of the war, people aren't sure of themselves. The temper of the men is not what it should be on account of our being in such an out-of-the-way spot. There's no phone, and the radio isn't working—something's gone wrong with it. And it's not all honey out here. How can you organize decent living conditions here? That's why the results are none too bright. . . I understand, the chief thing these days is transportation work, of course I understand that! They told me at the head office, when I got my appointment—it was before you came down from Moscow—'Now mind, the truck and tractor drivers must be your first concern. Give them decent conditions, treat them nicely, don't be shy about shaking hands with them, calling them by their names and patronymics, and riding beside them in the cab....'"

"So you've been shaking hands and sitting beside them all for nothing? It hasn't helped, eh?" Batmanov asked sarcastically.

"No, it hasn't helped," Merzlyakov drearily acquiesced.

"And what men we sent you! Zyatkov, Goncharuk, Umara Mahomet.... Do you know him?"

"I should say so! That troublemaker! Always grousing, nothing pleases him. You say you've sent down a lot of men. True, you have. But they're all so undependable," Merzlyakov fell to complaining again.

Batmanov cut him short.

"That will do! I've known you half an hour and your whining has set my teeth on edge already! You seem to know none but the dreariest words in the Russian language!"

Yellow-grey tatters of clouds crept dismally across the bleak sky. Early winter evening was setting in. All around lay the unrelieved grey snow, and every living thing at this future oil-pumping station was lost amid the greyness.

The construction site formed a square, with Chongr Cape on the one side jutting out

into the ice of the strait, and the chain of low hills on the other. Only the closest scrutiny could discover traces of human activity here, a few squat barrack dwellings huddled against the hills, two or three isolated cabins, a tiny shed at the very edge of the cape, and the barely perceptible figures of workmen moving in the dark holes in the middle of the site and on the ice. Here and there paths, dug or tamped down, wound snakily among the snowhills. And the entire scene was dominated by an incessant din as if dozens of hammers were being beaten against some huge copper vat.

Beridze and Alexei bleakly surveyed the cheerless scene of the construction's most important section. Kotlyarevsky was with them. Rogov, Liberman and Karpov had gone straight to the settlement—a row of barely perceptible structures under the hillsides. Filimonov had gone to the headland to see the truck drivers. Topolev and Tanya had been conducted to Kotlyarevsky's little house.

"Let's see what you've accomplished," Beridze said morosely to the section engineer.

They went up to the centre of the building site where the foundation for the Diesel pumping station was being dug. Workers in padded jackets were breaking the frozen rock-

like earth with pickaxes and crowbars. Several pairs of men were removing the earth on handbarrows. Two bonfires glowed at the bottom of the pit, around which another three dozen or so workers were warming themselves.

"What's this?" Beridze asked Kotlyarevsky.

"Digging the foundation."

"I know it's the foundation. The devil take you!" Beridze flared up. "What's the idea of this barbarous toil? Why don't you do some preliminary blasting?"

"We thought of doing it, but we received your instructions to save the explosives for trench digging in the strait."

"Haven't you any sense of your own? Saving doesn't mean hoarding the stuff. You should have put aside enough for blasting purposes and made use of the rest."

"But even assuming that you're husbanding the explosives," Kovshov remarked, "you could have warmed the soil up by bonfires surely? Not these two miserable bonfires, but a hundred, say. Economizing wood too?"

"You'd be surprised, but we have no firewood. There aren't any trucks to cart it out of the forest."

"Where are the trucks?"

"You saw yourselves, they're nearly all out of commission. And those that are working are transporting pipes."

"What about horses then?

"There were none left by the time I came. They hadn't laid in a stock of hay and forage. Some of the horses died and the rest were slaughtered."

"What about the tractors?"

Kotlyarevsky kept blowing his nose all the time. Beridze glared at him, simmering. Alexei, to prevent a furious outburst on his comrade's part, pulled him by the sleeve of his sheepskin coat.

"Let's look further."

"What's there to see!" Beridze fumed. "Further they're digging pits for oil storage, also by hand. Thousands of cubic metres of earth dug by hand! Right?"

Kotlyarevsky nodded.

"And they're riveting by hand too! I guessed as much as soon as I heard that din They're doing everything here the way it was done under Peter I, by human steam. Who gave you your engineer's diploma?" Beridze shouted in a towering rage.

Closer to the shore of the strait three huge round holes a metre deep had been dug into

the ground. Men were pecking at the hard earth with pickaxes, and in the gathering dusk only their caps were visible above the pits. A large iron ring with one segment missing lay nearby on the ground. Two pairs of riveters were working on sheets of iron. A helper stood ready by a transportable forge with a rivet in the fire.

Beridze shook his head sadly. He wished to say something to Alexei, but his voice was drowned in the noise, and the chief engineer could only wave his hand with a hopeless gesture. Alexei went up to the workers and touched one of them on the shoulder, motioning him to stop work. The din suddenly ceased, leaving a ringing noise in the ears.

"Have you been at this long?" Alexei asked.

"Pretty long!"

"What exactly is the job you've been given?"

"None at all," the riveter said with a wry smile, glancing at his mates. "It makes no difference whether we work or we don't work. We're just doing a bit o' riveting on our own, to while away the time. We asked the administration whether we could do some riveting, and they said all right. So here we are, keeping ourselves warm."

"Why don't you do pneumatic riveting, once you've started the job. It's easier than doing it by hand. Or haven't you got the equipment for it?"

"We've got it all right, but everything here's done by hand. There's hardly any electric current. The portable power plant doesn't generate much, and even that's hardly working."

"We ought to put up a power station," Kotlyarevsky muttered.

"Are you the standards' man, by any chance? Checking output?" the riveter asked Kovshov, and the workers laughed mirthlessly. "There's nothing to check, you can see everything at a glance."

"So I see," Alexei concurred. "Knock off for today. It'll be dark in half an hour, you'd better go and get a rest."

"No, we'd rather go on banging," the riveter demurred, and again the clatter of the hammers rent the air.

The cold grew increasingly intense. Kotlyarevsky was frozen to the marrow. Alexei rubbed his cheeks and stamped his feet, marvelling at Beridze who seemed oblivious to the cold although his beard and moustache were a mass of icicles. Ploughing through the

deep snow, the engineers made their way to the shore. Beridze was silent and gloomy.

"Why is everything here in such a state?" Alexei remorselessly questioned Kotlyarevsky. "You are working without any sort of plan, doing all kinds of odd jobs and totally ignoring the instructions issued by the chief engineer. You have scattered your workers instead of concentrating them on the main job. Why aren't you building a road to the island? Why are there no signs of any preparations for work on the strait? Didn't you get the order issued on November Seventh?"

"November Seventh? No, I never saw any such order," Kotlyarevsky muttered.

"You have let me down," Beridze burst out. "I recommended you for work here, I relied on you, I believed in you."

"How do you expect any work to be done when the men are desperate!" It was Kotlyarevsky's turn to raise his voice. "I didn't know what to do myself when the news came that Moscow had fallen.... What was the need of a road to the island if the Japanese would take it! And in general what were we doing here, who needed our efforts!"

On the other side of the building site Merzlyakov was conducting Batmanov to a brand new log house standing on the hillside apart from the barracks.

"Have a rest and warm up, Comrade Construction Chief. It's warm and cosy inside, thank goodness."

"Who lives here?"

"I do. We've built another little cabin like it for the works' superintendent Kotlyarevsky and the accountant."

"Warm, you say? You don't freeze here?" Batmanov queried.

"It's warm," Merzlyakov said with a sigh of relief. "It's always windy out here on the strait, blows all the warmth out. This is the first day there's no wind, in honour of your coming. We have to heat the stove day and night on account of the bad weather."

"I suppose it uses up a lot of wood?"

"Yes, quite a lot. It's a good thing we live in the forest!"

They walked up to a single-story cottage with a mansard, surrounded by a high fence with barbed wire on the top. The house looked odd amid the bleak scene of general neglect.

"You're a modest man, aren't you?" Batmanov said ironically. "Why, this is a palace not a cabin!"

"Kotlyarevsky designed it. It's all his doing, I would never have thought of half the things."

"But I take it the fence was your idea, not his. It isn't an engineer's business to invent fences like that."

"The fence is my own invention, you've guessed it, Comrade Construction Chief," Merzlyakov said with an ingratiating laugh.

He opened the wicket, and they entered the courtyard. The satiated grunt of a pig came from a solidly-built shed.

"Why, you've a regular farmyard!" Batmanov said in surprise. "Everything on a solid footing. A cow, pigs, poultry, eh?"

"A pig and poultry. To be sure."

Batmanov made a thorough inspection of Merzlyakov's prosperous menage.

"What I can't make out is how you managed to drag all this out here. Who helped you? Fifteen minutes ago I thought you a bad manager. It seems I was mistaken.... I suppose it must be hard to look after such a household? Probably takes up a lot of time?

Animals to be tended, feed provided, and one thing and another."

"Just so." Merzlyakov looked up at Batmanov, trying to guess what the latter was driving at.

"I don't think I'll go in," Batmanov suddenly decided. "I'll better pay a visit to the settlement."

"Do you want me to accompany you, Comrade Construction Chief?"

"Just as you please. If you're tired, you can stay at home."

On the way Batmanov's attention was arrested by the noise the riveters were making. He turned towards them.

"It's dusk already. Time to finish work, I should think," Batmanov said.

"There's no driving them home. Labour enthusiasm!" Merzlyakov explained with an air of solemn dignity.

"Enthusiasm, you say? Let's hear what they have to say on that score." He walked up to the workers and accosted the first man. "It's dark already. You'd better knock off. Go home and get a rest."

The riveter peered into the face of his interlocutor.

"Rest? We don't feel like resting."

"Why not?"

"You must be a newcomer here if you ask that. You'll soon find out why we don't feel like it!"

Batmanov turned towards the settlement. Merzlyakov, with a preoccupied anxious face, followed him like a shadow. They met Liberman. He was running from the barracks. Upon catching sight of Batmanov, the supply chief clutched his head in his characteristic way, exclaiming:

"Goodness gracious! You ought to see how the men are living! I'm rushing off to take immediate measures."

"Take it easy, Liberman!" Batmanov shouted after him.

Outside the first barrack he saw Rogov. The latter was talking to a lanky young man. He spoke in a calm level voice but apparently the drift of it made painful hearing. The lad stood stiffly at attention and even swayed under the impact of his lashing words.

"What's it all about?" Batmanov enquired, in passing.

"Making the acquaintance of the section steward," Rogov answered laconically.

Inside the barrack—a ramshackle, hastily-built log house—it was dark. An oil lamp

standing on a long table did not provide sufficient light for the whole barrack. Men in padded jackets, *valenki* and fur caps lay on the double-tiered bunks. Several men huddled around a cast-iron stove. Sneezing and coughing could be heard on all sides.

"Good evening, comrades!" Batmanov said.

No one answered him. Batmanov touched the stove in passing—it was barely warm. He sat down on a bench before the table, lit a cigarette and placed his opened cigarette case on the edge of the table. He took silent stock of his surroundings. The inmates of the barrack, too, were silent, eyeing him and the cigarettes.

"Well, are we going to keep silent all the time? I want you to tell me how you are living," Batmanov said good-naturedly.

"What's there to tell? If you've got eyes you can see for yourself. We're shivering with cold and waiting for no one knows what," said a stoop-shouldered old man standing by the stove.

"Comrade Zyatkov!" Batmanov exclaimed, recognizing him. "So you're here?"

"Yes, I'm here," the old man muttered grimly.

"And where's Goncharuk?"

"He's here too. Lying ill."

"Then let us give the section chief the floor, Comrade Zyatkov. Let him, as the boss of the place, explain to us why he built such foul living quarters that are worse than a barn. Why is it cold here? Where's the firewood?" Batmanov put his questions without glancing at Merzlyakov.

"One truck has been put on wood deliveries," Merzlyakov answered. "The firewood has to be brought from a distance and the truck can't manage to keep the whole place supplied. The road is a handicap—these men all know it—the truck keeps getting stranded."

"Why is the road in such bad condition? Why have you put only one truck on the job if it can't cope with the work?"

"The trucks are needed for the construction work. There aren't even enough of them for transporting pipes. You've seen yourself."

"I have—all your transport is at a standstill," Batmanov agreed. "And why? Speak up, man, livelier, please!"

Batmanov walked down the barrack, peering into the men's faces. Of the hundred and fifty men living here, fifteen were down with grippe, and the rest looked seedy—emaciated, dirty and unshaven. The air in the barrack was foul.

"Why aren't the sick men isolated from the rest? It's the primary condition in an epidemic. How do you account for living conditions being in such a neglected state?"

Merzlyakov was silent.

"Do you use the bathhouse?" Batmanov went on.

"There isn't any water for the bath," Zyatkov said.

"Why isn't there any water, Section Chief?"

"The water in the well is frozen. We have to cart up water from the stream, which is a long distance away. It's a question of transport again. We only bring up drinking water...."

Batmanov sat down on the bunk next to one of the workers who, he had noticed, was watching him with keen interest.

"Smorchkov, the driver, came running in here, and told us the Germans have been defeated at Moscow," the worker said. "Who told him that—you?"

"Yes. The Red Army has won a victory, and the Germans have been thrown back from Moscow."

"So it's true then!" A sigh of relief went round the room. A loud and excited murmur arose. The men stirred and moved closer.

"Thank you for bringing such good news," Batmanov's interlocutor said earnestly. He spoke Russian with a slight accent, and his constructions were not quite grammatical. "We heard all sorts of stories—that the Germans had Moscow. I couldn't believe it —the Germans got Moscow? How could we give up Moscow when Stalin said on the Red Square that we're going to win?"

He fell silent, still gazing intently at Batmanov and drawing in his legs which were wrapped in his padded jacket.

"You're ill too?" Batmanov asked. He already guessed who the man was.

"No wonder!"

"Grippe? High fever?"

"Grippe, no grippe! My heart's ill, my head's ill, my soul's ill. It's all through him." The worker pointed at Merzlyakov. "Why you ask? Are you a doctor?"

"No. Let's get acquainted—I'm the chief of your construction, my name is Batmanov —Vasili Maximovich."

The worker got up swiftly. He proved to be a short man, very broad in the shoulders. A hum ran through the barrack.

"We've been waiting for you an awful long time, chief!" the worker said. "They

said you wouldn't come—it's far, and cold, and no road. The end of the world. Did Dudin send you, or you come yourself?"

"Dudin sent me and I came myself. I'll tell you afterwards, comrades, why I couldn't come here before. Since I could not come earlier myself, I sent a trusted man out here, but something has happened to him. I don't think you've seen him. But I've heard a lot about you. You're Umara Mahomet, the welder, aren't you?"

"You've guessed. Umara Mahomet. I used to be a welder."

"Used to be? And now?"

"Now I'm a loafer. A parasite."

"Why a loafer?"

"There's no work for me. I was in a hurry to get out here quickly. But my work here is not wanted. I wrote to Dudin. If you hadn't come I would have had to run away from here. And everybody would have run away. Merzlyakov would have been left by himself. Or we would have driven him out ourselves...."

"So you couldn't find jobs for the men either?" Batmanov asked, turning slightly towards Merzlyakov.

"We haven't started welding yet, Comrade Construction Chief..."

"I'm not asking for a welding job!" Umara suddenly flared up. "I can load pipes on trucks! I can shovel snow! Give me any work, so long as it's useful—only don't make a loafer out of me! You just look all round—tractor drivers, welders, mechanics, fitters—we all want work, any kind of work! Our job isn't ready yet, but it will be. The construction must get going gradually."

"Quite right, Comrade Umara!" Batmanov said, curbing his excitement.

Umara stepped close up to Merzlyakov and shouted into his face in a voice full of pain and passion:

"We never forgive you that you make us parasites! You heard what Batmanov said, didn't you? He's a real chief. And you—you're no chief! We lost heart with you here, nearly went to the dogs! I wanted to run away from you, but where? A man shouldn't run away. They didn't let me go to the front, brought me here, so far away, to weld the pipe line. Dudin himself sent me. How I hurried to get here! We dragged the truck on our backs, tramped on foot.... What for, I ask you?"

"Don't shout at me, I'm not deaf," Merzlyakov said irritably, recoiling from the welder.

"You're not deaf," Umara agreed. "Only you've stuffed your ears with wadding.... Damn it, I'll shout, and you're going to listen! Let the construction chief look at you and look at me. Let him say who's right and who's wrong."

"I call you to order!" Merzlyakov rapped out angrily.

"Do you know what order is?" Batmanov asked in a suppressed voice.

"It's no good, Merzlyakov, it's very, very bad! We live dog's life," Umara came on again, "D'you think we complain because it's cold? No, we can forgive you the cold. That we're hungry? We forgive you that too. That there's little water? Never mind. That you grudge us a smoke? No matter! I have two brothers in the army—they're worse off. You've told us a hundred times: 'you mustn't demand things, it's wartime!' We have nothing to say to that, it's right! But you've made rags of us! Taken away our strength! Taken away our work! Played the devil with the construction job! That we'll never forgive you!" He turned to Batmanov in a towering passion. "Chief Batmanov, he must be brought to trial!"

"Who said I didn't give you any work?" Merzlyakov answered in a frightened tone,

drawing his head in. "You didn't want to work yourselves. There's plenty of work if you want it. You only have to ask."

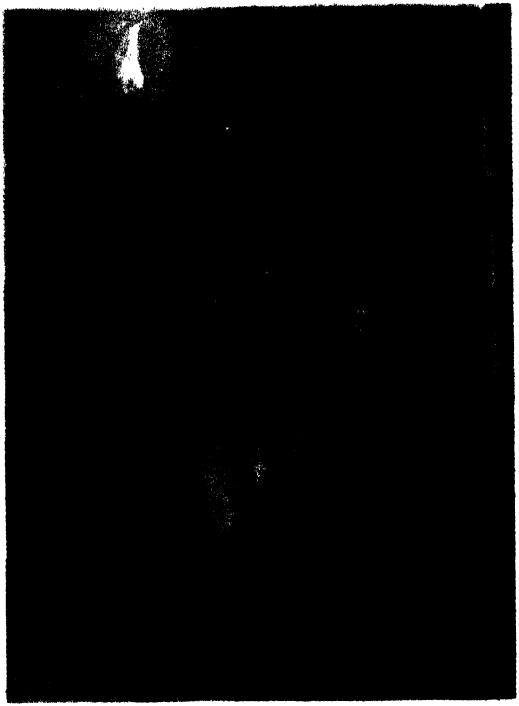
"Don't lie, Merzlyakov!" Zyatkov shouted, squaring his shoulders. "You're no good as a boss!"

Batmanov kept his heavy gaze fixed all the time on the section chief.

"I have come here to work with you together, comrades. I shan't leave here until we've put things in order and get them going properly," he said, getting up. Turning to Merzlyakov, he threw out: "Come on."

They were no sooner outside when Batmanov gripped Merzlyakov by the front of his coat, pulled him towards him, lifting him almost bodily off the ground, and gave vent to his pent-up indignation and fury, shouting:

"Who do you think you are, Merzlyakov? Who are you to dare make mock of our men, of our cause? What have you done with the trust that has been placed in you? I could overlook all blunders and shortcomings, I could put up with your incompetence, with the mess you've made here.... But when you treat Soviet men like swine—you're a scoundrel! We'll prosecute you for this! We'll prosecute you!"



He flung the gasping Merzlyakov from him, and the latter sprawled in the snow, speechless with terror.

Batmanov, with clenched fists, strode blindly away into the dusk. Rogov, coming towards him, stopped him almost by force.

"Vasili Maximovich, let me take over this outfit. The section's to my taste, it suits me."

Batmanov, breathing heavily, said nothing. Rogov reminded him:

"You promised me the right of choice. Well, I've made my choice."

"Yes, I promised. Take it over. Take it over at once!" Batmanov spoke in a gasping voice. The inmates of the barrack, driven to despair, haunted him. "We have done these men a grave wrong. We must win back their confidence. Clear ourselves in their eyes by giving them work. Have everyone work like the devil! I'll make a round of the barracks tomorrow, and I expect to find them well heated, and clean! Isolate the sick. See to the meals. Don't stint products. Give them enough to smoke. And give them work—good, useful work. They're starved for it, yearning for it. Well, what are you standing there for? Get going! And tell Liberman—I'll wring his neck if he doesn't get things moving!"

"Allow me to report?" Rogov said quickly, and proceeded without waiting for a reply. "I've sent the section steward for firewood – three trucks and the sledge train on which we travelled. I've sent one truck out for water. Karpov has gone to the Nivhi—he hopes to bring back some meat and fish. Liberman's taken charge of the kitchen, promises a good supper."

Merzlyakov appeared out of the semi-gloom. He pleaded, trying to catch Batmanov's eye:

"Comrade Construction Chief, you must consider all the difficulties."

Batmanov took no notice of him. The man did not exist for him any more, just as Grubsky did not exist for him. Such was Batmanov's way on those rare occasions when he lost faith in a man.

END OF BOOK TWO

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